


*The*  
MOTION PICTURE CHUMS  
OUTDOOR EXHIBITION



VICTOR APPLETON

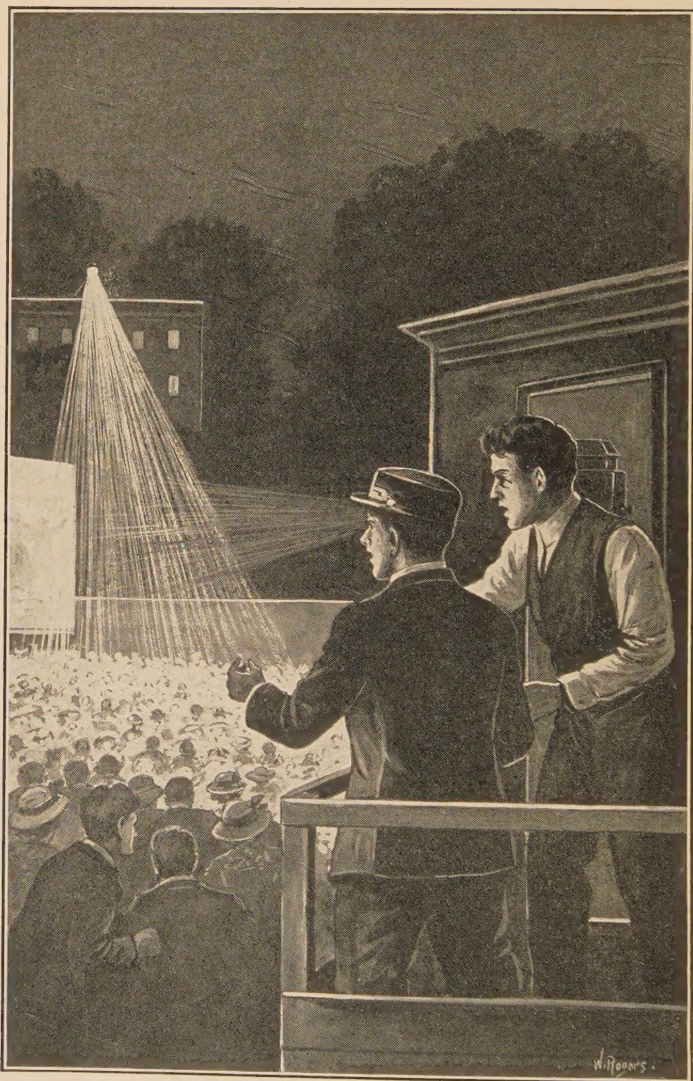
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• THE OPERATOR OF THE DISTANT SEARCHLIGHT WAS IN A POSITION TO THROW THE GLARE DOWN INTO THE AIRDROME.  
*Motion Picture Chums' Outdoor Exhibition.*

—Page 161.

The  
Motion Picture Chums'  
Outdoor Exhibition

OR  
The Film That Solved a Mystery

BY  
VICTOR APPLETON

AUTHOR OF "THE MOTION PICTURE CHUMS' FIRST VENTURE," "THE  
MOVING PICTURE BOYS SERIES," "THE TOM SWIFT SERIES," ETC.

*ILLUSTRATED*

NEW YORK  
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*Motion Picture Chums' Outdoor Exhibition*



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# THE MOTION PICTURE CHUMS' OUTDOOR EXHIBITION

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## CHAPTER I

### A MORNING ADVENTURE

"WELL, summer will soon be at hand, and then what?" asked Randy Powell.

The three motion picture chums—Frank Durham, Pepperill Smith and Randy Powell—were chatting in the little office of the Empire photo playhouse, on upper Broadway, New York City.

It was their own playhouse, for the energy, ambition and enterprise of the three boys had united to help them build upon the foundation of a small village motion picture show one of the most popular photo theatres in the metropolis.

"Yes," observed Frank, "the outing season is coming on and the pleasure resorts are the big leaders in drawing the crowds."

"Then what's the matter with our new Won-

derland at Seaside Park?" questioned Pep. "We worked up a good business there last year, didn't we?"

"So good," agreed Frank, "that our friend and helper, Hal Vincent, has asked us to let him have charge of it for the season."

"Then there's our home town, where we started in this business," went on Pep.

"Well," responded Frank, "you know it will be an experiment running the playhouse at Fairlands in warm weather. I think we were wise in placing those two cousins of Randy at the helm there."

"That's so. I suppose we've grown too big in our line to bother with a little proposition like that," remarked Pep, vauntingly.

"Say, how our apples do swim!" laughed Randy.

"That's all right," retorted Pep, who like his name, was decidedly peppery when roused. "Think I haven't learned something about the motion picture business in the last year and a half? Guess I haven't been asleep all of the time, quite!"

"Well, fellows," said Frank, "our backer, Hank Strapp, is simply delighted with the success we have made of the Empire here. His idea is a chain of photo playhouses. The Model, up at

Bellevue, that Dan Rainey is running for us, is doing a good business, and it will pay to keep the Empire going. Mr. Strapp, however, gives us credit for all the good ideas that have made the investment profitable. He says that people spend money more freely on amusements in the summer than at any other time."

"He's right in that," agreed Randy.

"Most of the money, though," continued Frank, "finds its way to the pleasure resorts. The man who can get the ideal location first, not too much overworked, nor too far from the city has the royal chance. So, set your wits to work and see how we can safely extend our business."

"Something new on the hooks—that suits me every time!" exclaimed Pep in his spirited way.

"Here's a letter for Mr. Jolly, Pep," said Frank, selecting an envelope from a pile on the desk that represented the morning's mail. "He was thinking of taking a run down to Seaside Park with Hal Vincent to look over things, but I don't think they will leave until noon. Do you mind taking it to him?"

"Not a bit of it. I'll stroll down to the hotel and keep my thinking cap on the while. Maybe I'll catch a bright idea or two as to our next move, hey?"

Pep set forth, leaving his chums in consulta-

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tion. It was a bracing, sunshiny morning and Pep had every reason to feel hopeful. He and his chums were making their way in the world and earning money. They were surrounded by loyal friends, and the "movies" life was full of variety and excitement, which just suited the boys.

"When Frank gets starting things, something's bound to happen," soliloquized Pep. "I hope we'll find something in the pleasure resort line. That season at Seaside Park was fine. Well, he's a good one!"

Pep's comment alluded to the driver of an automobile that came dashing recklessly down the street. The officer on the beat noticed the machine, too. He advanced to the edge of the sidewalk, and held up his club.

Not the least attention was paid to this warning. The driver, a flashily-dressed fellow, evidently in a big hurry to get somewhere, did not slacken speed; rather he increased it, if anything. The driver of a truck he grazed shot out an angry challenge. Then, in making a sharp turn, the chauffeur erred in his calculations and momentarily lost control of his car.

"Look out, there! Stop that machine!" shouted the officer, starting after the erratic auto,



while Pep, always on the alert for excitement, and active in following it up, preceded him.

It was a marvel that some of the people in the roadway were not run down. Pep had sent up a cry that warned most of them and there was a crowding back of those who saw the mad plunge of the automobile. Its driver saw a clear space before him, and drove the machine straight across the twenty or thirty feet of space intervening between it and the nearest street corner.

Pep held his breath. If some unsuspecting person should turn the corner just then, destruction seemed certain, for the auto was keyed up to a fearful rate of speed. Fortunately no one crossed its course, but the wheels took a sharp swing, there was a sound of crashing wood, then a jangle of breaking glass—and two small voices rang out in terror.

The machine had met an obstacle, upset it and gone on. The obstacle was a little flower stand, a familiar object to Pep, who passed the spot a dozen times a day. It was owned by a crippled boy named Benny Burns, and a younger sister assisted him most of the time. Benny had won the permission of the proprietor of the corner drug store to set his little stand in an enclosure between two iron pillars that framed an unused doorway. Benny was neat, tasteful and careful.

His operating space did not interfere with traffic, nor in any way shut off a view of the store window. Two pretty vases adorned one end of the little stand. They were always filled with fresh carnations or roses. They rather set off the front of the place and attracted attention.

"Hurt?" asked Pep breathlessly, still on the run, but a speedy glance answered him. Benny, pale and trembling, sat quite stupefied on a stool. It was the only part of his stand that had not been swept away. His sister cowered behind one of the pillars.

Pep hardly understood his reasons for keeping in pursuit of the automobile. He could scarcely hope to overtake it, for as it skidded across the sidewalk it went over the curb and darted down the side street like an arrow, far outstripping him.

"It's a shame!" he declared, energetically. "That reckless fellow has spoiled the whole business of those poor little people. Stop that machine—hey! hey!"

Running down the middle of the street after the flying auto, Pep yelled at the top of his voice, hoping pedestrians, or a possible policeman at the next corner, would heed the outcry and check the flight of the reckless automobilist.

Then his foot caught in a loose paving block

and he went headlong. He scrambled to his feet just in time to observe the machine turn down the next street. Its driver shot a flashing glance back at the pursuer. Pep fancied that he looked triumphant and rather malicious. The sight angered him. He shook his fist at the vanishing chauffeur.

"I'll know you the next time I see you, never you fear!" called Pep.

## CHAPTER II

### TWO LITTLE WAIFS

THERE was just indignation in Pep's eye, as he started back the way he had come to learn the full extent of the damage done in and around the flower stand.

Pep was a lad of warm sympathies. He had the picture of the flashily-dressed automobilist deeply imprinted on his mind. He only wished he had the number of his machine. With faith in the future and faith in himself, however, Pep felt that some day he would run across the reckless young man and make him pay for the damage done.

"New York's a big place," thought he, "but I'll keep my eye out. I'll find that fellow yet."

New York City and the world at large did not seem one-half as big to the motion picture boy as it had six months before. It was now nearly two years since he, Frank Durham and Randolph Powell had won the name of "The Motion Picture Chums."



Within that space of time the trio had seen much and learned a great deal. They had gained, too, not only in business education and experience, but in actual money. Pep, therefore, felt confidence in his ability to bring a culprit to time and right the wrongs of the weak and unfortunate.

The motion picture chums had come to their present situation from a very small start. Fairlands, an obscure Pennsylvania village, had been their home. Working on odd jobs about town to earn a little spending money, far-sighted, industrious Frank Durham had realized what system might do for three bright and willing boys not afraid of hard work. One autumn they had been overjoyed to find that their earnings and savings amounted to a goodly sum. Then they heard of an auction sale of a photo playhouse in a nearby city.

Fairlands would support just such an institution, Frank fancied. Randy was sure of it, and Pep grew enthusiastic over the idea. Within a month the proposition had proved its worth. The experiences of the young enthusiasts have been told in the first volume of the present series, entitled "The Motion Picture Chums' First Venture; Or, Opening A Photo Playhouse in Fairlands."

The success of the first Wonderland photo playhouse led to a bright idea when spring arrived. Frank was afraid the town would not support a motion picture show through the hot months. In the meantime they had secured Ben Jolly, a skillful pianist, and Hal Vincent, a clever ventriloquist, as firm friends and helpers. The five began to seek for a favorable field for summer employment in the line in which they had become expert.

In the second book of this series, called "The Motion Picture Chums At Seaside Park; Or, The Rival Photo Theatres of the Boardwalk," the story of the success of their second playhouse at Seaside Park has been related. The partners went through a varied experience with rivals, enemies, storm and lack of capital. Up to the last outing excursion from the city to the pleasure resort, the bustling group kept Wonderland No. 2 up to a standard that brought in the dimes a-plenty and stimulated the chums to further efforts.

It was at Seaside Park that the motion picture chums happened across an eccentric character, which acquaintance led to their gaining the warm friendship and financial backing of a genuine, free-hearted "wild Westerner." This was Hank Strapp, from Butte, Montana. He had sold his

ranch and had come East to see the world, invest his money and enjoy life.

It had fallen to Frank Durham's lot to save Mr. Strapp from the clutches of a swindler. Out of gratitude and a longing for true friends, the ex-ranchman had encouraged a plan in the minds of the boys to try a winter season in New York City. In the next preceding volume, "*The Motion Picture Chums on Broadway; Or, The Mystery of the Missing Cash Box*," their trials, struggles and adventures provide a sample of what pluck and energy can accomplish when directed aright. In a systematic, business-like way, carefully counting the pennies and the minutes, Frank and his loyal assistants had made of the Empire photo playhouse a popular and profitable venture.

Outside of making Mr. Strapp satisfied with his investment, Frank and his chums had found opportunity to do good to others. They had trained a clever boy from the slums, one Dan Rainey, until he became not only a smart and industrious helper about the Empire, but as the city exhibitions began to lose business with the close of the winter season, they gave him practical charge of a small playhouse they had purchased at Belleview, a little town up the Hudson.

At Belleview, too, there was now a lad named Foster Gilliam. This boy Frank had picked up

at Seaside Park, poor, homeless and persecuted, and had found him a haven in the show at Fairlands. Later he had discovered that a relative of Foster living in Bellevue had left him some money. Notwithstanding his good fortune, the grateful boy had become fascinated with the movies and he was now assisting Dan Rainey in running the Model.

Thus, with the photo playhouses at Fairlands and Bellevue in good hands, Hal Vincent anxious to try his luck at the old stand at Seaside Park, and the Empire in such good running order that they could get trusty assistants to operate it, the motion picture chums had come to a new springtime seeking new fields to conquer.

So on the eve of a new departure in the field they had filled so well, an exciting episode had crossed the path of adventurous Pep Smith. His first thought as he found himself outdistanced by the reckless automobilist was to hurry back in the wake of the destruction the flying machine had wrought.

A big crowd had gathered about Benny Burns and his little sister. The latter was crying and holding a broken vase. The proprietor of the drug store was viewing the shattered window, which had received the full force of the other falling vase, and was scolding furiously.



"You've got to get that truck away from here," he declared, "and stay away! Here I'm out the price of that big pane of glass, the window is all littered up, and I don't like to see this confusion and excitement."

"If it isn't too much," quavered Benny, "maybe we can pay for a new window."

"Oh, no," answered the storekeeper, with a shrug of his shoulders, his tone softening as he noted the worried faces of his helpless pensioners. He was an over-busy, nervous kind of a man and only wanted to get the circumstances off his mind as speedily as possible.

"I'll help get poor Benny's affairs in shipshape order, Mr. Ross," observed Pep, who knew the storekeeper quite well. "Until we find out what is best to be done we will move the outfit down to the Empire."

Pep's cheeriness inspired even the officer on the beat to help him carry the makeshift little counter, formed of rough boards covered with cambric, to the playhouse, and inside. Then they went back for the ice-chest in which the surplus stock of flowers was kept. Benny limped after them, carrying an armful of the carnations that had been scattered around. His sister, with solemn, tear-stained face, hugged close the broken vase.

Frank and Randy viewed the queer procession

first with surprise and then with interest. Frank was in full sympathy with the little cripple, whom he had known for some time. In fact it had been through his influence that the Burns children had obtained their stand privilege. While Pep was reciting the details of the smash-up little Ruth sat crying softly to herself in one of the chairs. Pep worked himself up to a high state of excitement, telling of the flashily-dressed automobilist he "was going to run down yet!"

"It just puts us out of business," said Benny. "Why, we couldn't get a stand like that at the corner for less than fifty dollars a month. Here we had it free," added the little cripple mournfully, "and now it's clear gone from us."

"Perhaps not," remarked Frank. "I think I can fix things up with Mr. Ross."

"He's been mighty good to us, just as you all have," declared Benny gratefully, "and I'll pay you all for the help you have given us, some day."

"Expecting to make a fortune out of your pretty flowers, eh, Benny?" rallied Randy smilingly.

"No, sir," returned the little cripple, sober as a judge. "If Ruth and I had what's coming to us, we'd be able to lease the best stand in New York City."

"Is that so?" observed Pep curiously, "tell us about it, Benny."

## CHAPTER III

### A HUNGRY VISITOR

BENNY BURNS was pleased at the interest shown by Pep and the others in his affairs. He glanced around the cozy playhouse as if it was a sort of enchanted palace.

"There isn't much to tell," he said, shyly.

"Give us what there is, Benny," urged Frank.

"Well, then, Ruth and I have been cheated out of a whole fortune. We'd be rich if we had what belongs to us."

There was no doubting the little fellow's earnestness, but Pep looked somewhat skeptical.

"We've never said much about it to any one, because a man we went to for advice said we needed a detective more than a lawyer to help us out," continued Benny. "We had no money to pay for some one to help us, so we could do nothing. You see, we were very small when our mother died. Then father was sickly and went away for his health and died. Then we became

wards of our half-uncle, Jasper Patterson, and he turned out to be a bad man. One day he disappeared with all the money my father had left us and we've never seen him nor heard of him since."

"How long ago was that?" asked Randy.

"Three years," replied Benny. "We've had to look around for a living, Ruth and I, ever since."

Frank regarded the little fellow thoughtfully for a minute or two. Then in a kindly tone he said:

"I guess we'll have to keep you under our wing for a spell, Benny, till you get on your feet. I am going to see Mr. Ross. You wait here."

"Mr. Ross is dreadfully angry at us," declared Ruth. "It won't be much use talking to him."

"Oh, he is just a little provoked," said Frank. "He's a nervous man, but he soon gets over his crossness."

It was from Mr. Ross that the motion picture chums had first leased the building in which the Empire was. The druggist was agent for the owner and had made a very good commission for finding a tenant.

Mr. Ross had become quite friendly with Frank and his friends. Outside of the winning qualities of the boys, he had found them decidedly help-



ful in a business way. The drug store did mostly a transient business, the neighborhood trade being small and considerably divided up. During the warm months Mr. Ross operated a soda water fountain.

From the day the Empire started Mr. Ross noticed an increase in his sales. A great many patrons of the photo playhouse, out for a few hours' enjoyment and seeking a light refreshment after the show, went to the nearest source, and the drug store profited through its proximity to the playhouse.

Frank was aware of these facts and knew that Mr. Ross appreciated them. He found the drug store man immersed in looking over some bills. He had probably forgotten the incident of the broken window-pane amid the rush of new events, but Frank reminded him of it at once.

"Our little friend, Benny Burns, tells me you had a smash-up here," said Frank. "I want to pay for the broken window, Mr. Ross."

"Oh, that!" replied the druggist in his quick sharp way. "I've ordered a new pane."

"How much?" asked Frank. "The lad feels grieved over it after all your goodness to him."

"Pshaw! mere trifle."

"Not to Benny, it seems," pursued Frank. "I

fancy he and that little sister of his had grown to look at their stand here as home to them."

"Why, of course. Who's disputing it? I guess I'm getting nervous with overwork. Spoke sort of cross to them," sputtered Mr. Ross, flushing. "Neat little people, and really," continued the druggist, casting about to make amends, "I'd feel quite lonesome without those pretty flowers around. Tell them so, will you, Durham?"

"I'll be delighted to do so," answered Frank. "I think, though, Benny would feel better if you would let him pay for the damage done."

"Why, it isn't worth speaking of," declared Mr. Ross. "If it had been one of the big panes it would be different. See here, Durham, tell them I'm a bear only when I get rattled. They are your favorites. That's enough for me, even if I didn't like them real well. Your show has helped my trade amazingly, and if the little folks want a new stand or anything like that, count me in for a donation—understand?"

"I do," replied Frank, warmly—"that you are a very kind-hearted man, Mr. Ross, and it isn't likely that automobiles are going to make a practise of trying to ruin Benny's business."

Frank had a way of reaching people's hearts, and he counted his success very satisfying in the

present instance. He hastened to report to the anxious Benny. The little fellow was delighted over the way his troubles had blown over and his sister cried with gratitude and joy when she learned the result of Frank's visit to the druggist.

"Benny, you go with Randy and see if he can't fix you up with a new and better counter. You needn't hesitate to make a moderate investment, Randy," advised Frank. "I'll take the risk of his paying it back some time."

"Yes, maybe that fortune will come along some day and Benny will make us all rich!" declared Pep. Benny and his sister went away piloted by Randy, hopeful, happy and jolly as could be.

"Well, you're a trump, Frank Durham!" said Pep enthusiastically, regarding his chum with admiration. "I tell you there's a heap of good deeds to your score."

"What about your share, Pep?" asked Frank. "How about that letter for Mr. Jolly?"

"I declare, I forgot all about it!" cried Pep in dismay, and bolted off to make up for lost time.

Frank, left alone, busied himself looking over the morning's mail. The motion picture chums had brought their business enterprise to a stage

where they were recognized as quite active and important elements in the "movies" world.

There were letters from film exchanges listing the latest novelties, from manufacturers of utilities reaching out for their trade, offers from singers and actors seeking an engagement. Frank ran through the various letters, placing aside those upon which he wished to consult Mr. Strapp, whom he expected momentarily.

"I wonder if the exchange has found us the help we're after?" soliloquized Frank.

The day before it had been decided that Frank and Mr. Strapp should take a day or two off and look up some new business prospects, as yet purely a possibility in their minds. Frank had spoken to the manager of a local exchange where they had dealings as to finding a handy substitute. He now arose and went into the little telephone booth in one corner of the room.

The general litter of the place had been already cleared away by the janitor. That in the little office Pep and Randy always attended to. This morning, however, they had been interrupted in the task.

Many an evening after the last reel had been rolled off Pep would slip out and bring in a light supper. Sometimes it was a brick of ice cream and cake; at other times sandwiches and coffee.

These little "snacks" were greatly relished by all, especially after a busy day. The boys and Mr. Strapp—and Ben Jolly and Hal Vincent if they were about—would sit around the big office table and discuss the events of the day and plan for the morrow. Sometimes Mr. Strapp would get to telling some of his adventures on his ranch out West, and it would be long after midnight before the little party broke up.

Upon the table just now there lay the change tray from the ticket booth and some new film reels. The tray contained quite a sum in silver. Nearby was a torn paper bag, containing the remnants of the feast of the night previous—a doughnut and two sandwiches.

Frank called up the exchange, to be advised to hold the wire until the person he asked for by name could be called to the 'phone. Waiting for the expected summons, he chanced to glance through the half open doorway of the booth to become at once interested in an intruder.

This was a youth about Frank's own age. At a glance our hero observed that he was a lad in hard luck. His clothing was worn and wrinkled as if he had slept in it. His face was thin and pale and on one cheek was a bad scar recently healed, the apparent result of a blow or a fall.

The newcomer looked about the office as if



wondering why some one was not in sight. His eyes ran over the change tray and the reels casually and they brightened as they fell upon the eatables. Their owner moved to the door and shot a quick glance all about the main room. Then he stealthily approached the table and stretched out his hand.

Frank was about to show himself, for he feared that the money tray was in danger. Then he stood silent, watchful, astonished and pitying. The stranger quickly seized one of the sandwiches. His lips parted eagerly like a person half famished. He snatched a quick bite of the sandwich, which he bolted ravenously. Just then the telephone bell rang.

With a start the lad thrust the sandwich inside the breast of his coat, guilty-faced and embarrassed.

"Why, the poor fellow!" exclaimed Frank Durham, hanging up the receiver, heedless now of the call, and coming into view.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE MISSING FILMS

“WHY, hello—how did you get in here?” asked Frank pleasantly, but looking at the intruder keenly.

The latter flushed a trifle, hesitated and was obviously confused. He shifted from one foot to the other, gulped a bit and finally replied:

“The front door was open. I was looking to find some one about the place.”

“Any one in particular?” questioned Frank.

“Why, yes, sir—Mr. Durham.”

“That’s myself,” nodded Frank. “What can I do for you?”

The visitor seemed relieved, probably at discovering that he had to do with a youth like himself. He looked up and then down—not that his glance was shifty, it was as if he was playing for time.

“I heard down at the exchange that you were looking for some extra help,” he said.

"Oh, Mr. Throop sent you here?" inquired Frank.

"No, sir," answered the lad. "I just heard that the Empire needed some one. I'm in the movies line; I'm out of a job and I need work badly, I tell you."

The visitor spoke these last words in quite a despairing way and gave Frank a pleading look. Frank did not doubt his eagerness and anxiety. He tried to make it smooth for the applicant in his usual gracious way, by appearing to take no notice of his forlorn condition, and saying in a casual tone:

"You say you are in the movies line?"

"Yes, sir," responded the lad, quickly. "I've had a great deal of training and experience. In fact, I've been in it for over two years."

"You look pretty young for that. What is your name and what can you do?"

"I'm Dave Sawyer, and I know all about a photo playhouse, from ushering up to running the projector."

"Oh, you can do that?" said Frank, quite interested. "Had real practice, eh?"

"More than practice," answered the lad. "I've been educated up to it in quite a large way. I don't want to brag, but if you will try me out I feel sure you'll find me handy and up to date."

"Sit down," invited Frank. "We are thinking of making some changes here because one or two of us may be needed at some other point. Where did you work last? I suppose you can refer to your last employer?"

The boy who called himself Dave Sawyer did not answer. A shadow crossed his face, he fumbled at a loose button on his threadbare coat and his lips twitched. Then he steadied and looked his questioner frankly in the eye.

"That's my trouble—that's why I guess I can't make a deal with you," he said, bluntly. "The man I worked for most would knock me so hard that you wouldn't let me inside your doors, if you'd believe all he said. If he found me working in a position, he'd make it his especial business to get me out of it. And that isn't my only trouble," added the lad, with a sigh. "I'm what I say—a good hand at anything around a movies. I have no bad habits. I tell the truth and I'm honest. If that won't do, I guess I'd better not waste your time," and he got up from his seat in a forlorn way.

"Hold on," spoke Frank, quickly. "You talk as if you meant what you say, and I'm interested. Can't you tell me a little more about your affairs?"

"No, sir," answered the boy steadily. "I've

sized everything up and I know what I'm about. The man I told you about can break me, and I want to forget him and all the wretched slave-driving life he's led me. You can imagine what kind of a man he is when I tell you that he gave me this scar on my face for no reason whatever."

There was vim and fire in the lad—Frank saw that—despite his miserable condition. Dave Sawyer stood for a moment bristling with indignation, his fists clenched and his eyes blazing. Then he relaxed, his head drooped and he took a step towards the door. Then he paused and looked up again, and tears were shining in his eyes.

"Mr. Durham," he said unsteadily, "I can see the kind of a person you are and I wish I'd struck you when I was more respectable. It looks fine to me to be in a clean show like this and with such fellows as you. I can be of big help to you, I know it, and you will find that out if you try me, but you've got to take me on faith. I can't see any other way."

Frank was touched by what his visitor said. His kind nature had many a time paid attention to poor waifs and strays who needed a helping hand. Perhaps Frank was a good judge of human nature, for few of them had turned out frauds, or ungrateful. He saw that there was something



under the surface with Dave Sawyer that the lad would not divulge; that it was his "business" to find out. Still, Frank could not resist something winning in the appeal of his visitor, and he acted on impulse.

"Would you like to look around the place? Maybe you can give me some suggestions," he said.

"Indeed I would," replied the lad, brightening up.

He seemed to take in everything from the stage setting to the ventilating apparatus. It was when they entered the projecting booth, however, that the boy's eyes began to sparkle. He seemed for the moment to forget everything except the mechanism before him. His glance took in the projector, with all its fine attachments, and he handled the knobs, wheels and switches as daintily as though they were jewels.

"I say," he observed, "you've got the latest and the best in the projector line, haven't you?"

"Yes," assented Frank, discerning that the lad had thorough knowledge of the apparatus before him.

"See you've got some color discs," and Dave took one of them from a case. "Solid color. You're behind in those."

"Indeed," asked Frank, "how is that?"

"Haven't you seen the chromatics? They're simply beautiful. You have to run a double reel to operate them, but the cost is light and the effect is fine. I tried them my last job—on a mountain scene. Sunset, and everything pink. The disc runs the shading from a faint glow to the deepest crimson. Then it fades—fades slowly, just like a real sunset. The audience just held their breath, it was so natural, where I tried it—down in Philadelphia."

Dave bit his lip at this unintentional disclosure of his recent place of employment. Frank pretended not to notice it. They spent several minutes in desultory talk about the films.

"I guess you know your business," remarked Frank, as he led the way out of the booth. As he did so he caught sight of a rough-looking fellow with a disagreeable face making for the front door. Frank fancied that Dave, behind him, uttered some kind of half-suppressed cry and fell back still farther. By the time they reached the office the man had passed out into the street. Frank supposed it was some tramp or pencil peddler, many of whom strolled into the place on their rounds during the early morning.

"See here," said Frank, halting and facing his visitor, "I've a mind to try you."

"I hope you mean that," responded Dave. "It

means a lot to me. I won't shirk work. Only give me a show and try to have confidence in me until you know me better."

"I've got that already," declared Frank with a pleasant smile. "Why shouldn't I have? For I know you have told me the truth. However, I want to speak to a gentleman who is interested in the Empire before I make any definite arrangement. I expect him, a Mr. Strapp, very soon. In the meantime—here, take this."

Frank drew out his pocketbook and tendered to the astonished lad a five-dollar bill. The latter stared at it, catching his breath.

"Oh, say!" he gasped, "you know you mustn't do that."

"Why mustn't I?" inquired Frank. "You're willing to work it out, aren't you?"

"Oh, yes, indeed——"

"Then go and get a good meal," directed Frank, thinking of the poor stale sandwich. "A shine, too, and perhaps a new cap and a hair cut would make you feel more like yourself. We'll see later about other things. Oh, pshaw! don't make me feel uncomfortable," for Dave had seized his hand and wrung it with fervor.

Hank Strapp came bustling into the place and the strange boy went out. If Frank had watched him, he would have seen Dave peer cautiously

past the doorway before he started across the sidewalk. Indeed, he seemed so cautious, that Pep, returning, bumped squarely against him.

"Hello—excuse me," he hailed, giving the stranger a sharp glance. The latter stepped clear of the entrance and darted down the street.

"Oh, that's the young fellow I just saw, was it?" exclaimed Pep, as he lingered in the doorway of the office and overheard Frank detailing briefly to Mr. Strapp the particulars of the boy's application for work.

"You saw him, did you?" remarked Frank. "Looked pretty hungry, didn't he?"

Pep pushed the bag that held their midnight lunch into the waste basket. Frank lifted the cash tray to the top of his desk, continuing to talk about his odd visitor. Suddenly he broke off with an ejaculation.

"Why, I say," he said hurriedly, "what's become of the films?"

The three metal boxes that had been on the table were no longer in view. They had mysteriously disappeared.

"What's the trouble, Durham?" inquired Mr. Strapp.

"Why, the films. They were here all right half an hour ago," and he thought of the trampish-looking man he had seen leaving the place

when he came out of the operating booth with Dave Sawyer.

Pep, however, instantly thought of the latter. He was quick to jump at conclusions and he had observed a good many odd things since coming to the big city.

"Frank Durham," he ejaculated excitedly, "you've got a lesson this time, I fancy! Your slick visitor has simply stowed those films in his pocket, and you're out what they cost and five dollars in cash!"



## CHAPTER V.

### A NEW HELPER

FRANK was rather taken aback at the way things had turned out. The films were certainly nowhere in the room. He at once took a look over the change tray. So far as he could judge its contents had not been disturbed.

"It's strange," he commented, almost to himself, "if we have been visited by a thief, why did he leave that ready cash behind him?"

Then Frank recalled that when he had taken Dave Sawyer to look over the place, he had pushed the tray under some newspapers in hunting for the key to the operating booth. Further than that, when they returned to the office Dave had been under his eye all the time. He could not have taken the films without Frank seeing him.

"Almost as bad as the fellow you rescued me from, who tried to separate me from my money, Durham!" remarked Mr. Strapp.

"Yes," put in Pep, "the woods are full of sharps. I reckon you won't see much of this Sawyer fellow any more, Frank."

The situation was not a pleasant one for Frank. In his own mind he was sure that his late visitor was not directly responsible for the theft, but could the suspicious-looking man he had noticed have been an accomplice? Frank thoughtfully figured up on a scrap of paper the value of the films. It amounted to a considerable sum.

Just then the agent of a printing house doing considerable business for the Empire put in an appearance and Frank and Mr. Strapp were busy with him for nearly an hour. Pep meantime was filling the ticket reels with numbered strips for the day's business. As the agent left the office who should come in but Dave Sawyer.

Evidently he had been waiting outside for some time until the agent was through. The change in his appearance from the first time Frank had seen him was remarkable. Dave was beaming and the tired, hungry look had left his face. He now wore a new cap, and had obtained a hair cut and tidied up, as Frank had suggested. The dust and creases had been brushed from his clothes and he wore a new white collar and a neat tie. His eyes were clear and his face wore a smile of contentment.

"I feel as if I had been made over again, Mr. Durham," he declared. "Oh, that meal!"

"Why!" cried the impetuous Pep, jumping to his feet, "it's the boy I met leaving here. Say," he went on in his blunt fashion, "do you know anything about some films missing from here just after you left?"

"Why—what films? Do you mean to say that something has been stolen and that I had anything to do with it!" exclaimed Dave with an astonished stare.

"Hold on, Pep; be a little rational," said Frank quickly, but the harm had been done. Dave's face showed how deeply he was hurt. "I am glad to see you back," proceeded Frank. "We've missed some films. They couldn't have been taken except when you and I were in the operating booth. You know that trampish-looking man who went out to the street just as we returned to the office—why, what's the matter?"

Frank, Mr. Strapp and Pep alike stared at the boy as an incoherent cry left his lips. Dave stood stock-still and mute as if something had struck him dumb. His face turned a dead white and he seemed to lose his breath. His eyes were filled with what to the observant Frank looked like pain, fright and horror combined. Then Dave

did a strange thing. He wheeled about swiftly and made a dive through the office doorway.

"Don't you see!" cried the excitable Pep. "He has found out that we suspect him and he's gone for good this time, I'll bet you. Say, I'm going to follow."

"Pep! Pep! Come back! You're all wrong about this affair and——"

Frank spoke in vain. Pep had bolted almost as summarily as his predecessor. Dave was out of the front door in advance of him. Randy Powell had just arrived and as Pep came outside stood staring wonderingly after the apparent fugitive.

"Why, what struck that fellow?" Randy inquired. "He went out of here as if some one had fired him."

"Come on, I don't want to lose sight of him!" and Pep rushed Randy along with him.

"What's the excitement?" asked his startled comrade.

"Some of our films are missing," explained Pep. "That fellow took them, or knows who did. Keep him in sight, Randy."

"Why don't you get that policeman yonder to nab him and have him searched?"

"Huh!" derided Pep, "you can count on it that he isn't carrying his plunder around with

him. No, I want to follow him to his hang-out. Then I'll act."

They allowed the unsuspecting Dave to keep slightly in advance of them. He was going at no laggard pace, but his head was bent down and when his side face showed as he crossed a street the boys could see that he was much disturbed.

Finally Dave turned from Broadway into a side street—and then into a narrow, ill-kept alley. He entered the doorway of a dilapidated lodging house of the poorer class.

"We've got him now," said Pep. "We'll wait a few minutes—and then if he doesn't come out we'll go into that place and hunt for him."

"He must be pretty poor to live in a house like that," observed Randy.

In about five minutes Dave came out, but this time he was not alone. A disreputable but shame-faced man was with him. It was the same person who had visited the Empire an hour previous, but of course Randy and Pep did not know that.

The two halted outside the entrance to the lodging house. The boy was talking earnestly.

"He's scolding the man," remarked Pep. "I'll bet he's his father."

Dave seemed making some earnest appeal to the disreputable individual who was his com-



panion. The latter shifted and shuffled about. He ran his ragged sleeve across his eyes and appeared to be whimpering.

Finally he took out two or three banknotes and reluctantly gave them to the boy. He fumbled in another pocket and brought out a folded slip of paper. Then the two left the doorway, Randy and Pep following. After going several blocks Dave and his companion turned into a pawnshop.

When they came out the boy's pockets were bulging. Pep observed this, but did not say much. The circumstance had set him to thinking. Randy, more sedate than himself, read an enigma in the episode, as he noted the pale, sorrowful face of the boy and the slouching, humbled manner of the man with him.

The trail led back to Broadway. The man waited outside while the boy went into the little office of a ticket broker and came out with a bit of pasteboard in his hand. Then there was another long talk between the two. The man took the ticket, also some money the boy gave him. Then the boy took his hand, and looking him in the face seemed talking in an urging, pleading way. They parted, and the boy, with set lips and a serious face, started straightway in the direction of the Empire.

"I declare!" breathed Randy at the end of ten minutes.

"This puzzles me," confessed Pep. "He's gone right into the playhouse and straight back to Frank."

"Then we have been all at sea as to his stealing those films," observed Randy. "No thief would act the way he is doing. Don't you see, Pep? He made that man give him some money and a pawn ticket, and he's probably got the missing films in his pockets."

"Yes, I must have been mistaken and he is honest after all, if he's bringing those films back."

Frank was alone in the office. Mr. Strapp was at the front of the stage talking with a man who was repairing an electric fan.

"Why, Sawyer!" exclaimed our hero in surprise, looking up from a letter he was writing. "What made you leave us so suddenly?"

"I went after those films—those stolen films," announced Dave steadily, his lips tightly set. "There they are," and he drew the three flat tin cases from his pockets and placed them on the desk before Frank. "I'm sorry, Mr. Durham, for it's through my coming here that they were taken. So, you see, we'd better part company. Your friends know about it and I shouldn't feel

at all comfortable, even if you wanted to give me a job, after what has happened."

"I do, more than ever," declared Frank, heartily, placing a friendly hand upon Dave's shoulder. "As to the people here, I fancy they can't help but be kind to you. They are made that way, and are good to everybody."

Dave's head drooped, and he seemed on the verge of breaking down. Finally he lifted his troubled but grateful face to Frank.

"Mr. Durham," he said with a slight catch in his voice, "you've a right to know this much—my great trouble in life is my father. He is a weak, shiftless man—too weak to resist the temptation of strong drink; too incompetent to hold a regular position. I did not know that he was following me this morning when I came here. He took those films and pawned them. I caught him in time. I don't think he will be a bother to people here any more, for I bought him a railroad ticket and he promised to go to his brother, who lives in Connecticut.

"If he does, I told him I would send him half of what I earned every week. If he comes back, my father though he is, I told him I would certainly have him arrested if he ever broke out again in the way he did this morning."

"Poor fellow!" said Frank, sympathetically,

“you’ve got your load of troubles, haven’t you? Well, you’ve proved yourself the true kind. I not only take you on faith, but with entire confidence. I want you to go to work for us, and I want you to let me share your troubles.”

## CHAPTER VI

### AT RIVERSIDE GROVE

"SAY that again," urged Hank Strapp.

"If you are looking for a new movies prospect—" began Dave Sawyer.

"That's just what!" declared Pep Smith, never abashed as to breaking in where he was interested.

"Then I can probably give you a hint 'as to one of the best on earth. Please excuse me, Mr. Durham, if I have sat here listening to what you people have been talking about, but I am very anxious to do something for you in return for all you have done for me."

"See here, Sawyer," observed Mr. Strapp, casting a friendly eye upon the young fellow, who was fast making his way into the affections of the generous-hearted old man, "don't you get the idea that we consider you butting in whenever an idea that is helpful comes into your mind. You're a part of this show, and we're glad of it."

"Thank you," returned Dave, with a good deal of feeling. "It's pretty nice to hear you say that."

It was three days after Dave had first appeared on the scene. Probably few lads ever experienced so rapid a transition from misery to comfort. Frank did not have to explain all about their new aid to his friends. When he told them that Dave had explained satisfactorily everything regarding the stolen films, it was enough for them. Then Dave started in to show that his pretensions to being a "movies man" had not been overstated. He fairly surprised Frank the way he took hold of things. He ran the projector like a veteran, suggested several new features that were practical and went about his work in a cheerful way that attracted the attention of Mr. Strapp.

"You seem pretty happy, Sawyer," remarked the ranchman the second morning of Dave's engagement, as he came upon their new aid tinkering at a loose lens, whistling softly the while.

"I ought to be," replied Dave, lifting a pair of sparkling eyes to his interlocutor. "I feel as if some one had lifted me out of knee-deep mud into a nest of warm, clean feathers."

It was the third morning of his career at the Empire that Dave "came out strong," as Mr. Strapp afterwards put it. Each day Frank and



his friends had taken up the discussion of their plans for branching out in new directions for the spring and summer season.

With Dave in the operator's booth and Randy and Pep in charge of affairs generally, Frank and Mr. Strapp were able to make little trips about the vicinity of New York City. They visited various resorts, parks and outing grounds, but had found some overcrowded and worked out and others too new or unpromising. Mr. Strapp was overflowing with the idea of a string of motion picture shows. Frank and his chums were enthusiastic over striking some new field or features that could be developed into a season success.

"If we only knew where to look for just what we want," Randy had remarked, when Dave had said, somewhat timidly: "I think I know the exact thing you're looking for." Now all eyes were fixed upon "the new hand."

"What was in your mind, Sawyer?" asked Frank.

"It's strange how things come about," observed Dave, "but only the day before I came here I heard some men discussing a brand new proposition in the way of a high class summer park."

"Where?" inquired Pep curiously.

"On the Palisades of the Hudson River, just a

little way from the city. They had even got the name settled on."

"What was it?" asked Randy.

"Riverside Grove."

"That sounds all right," commented Frank, "but haven't I heard that name somewhere?"

"I shouldn't wonder," replied Dave. "You see, the place ran half of last season, but it wasn't a success. I was in one of the film exchanges the day I tell you about. Three men were talking. One was a promoter named Purtelle. What he was trying to do was to get the men he was with to take some stock in the company that is going to run the proposition. It seems that the owner of the grounds had to foreclose on the old owners. This promoter had some big ideas, and he had talked the company into letting him try to make a bigger thing of the project and become its manager."

"I see," nodded Frank, much interested.

"You know what beautiful spots there are along the Palisades," went on Dave. "They say this one is ideal."

"From what you say, and to my way of thinking," announced Mr. Strapp, arising briskly, "we must look over that spot right away before anybody else gets in ahead of us."

"I think you are right, Mr. Strapp," said

Frank. "These outdoor exhibitions are getting to be all the rage."

Dave Sawyer was able to explain the location of Riverside Grove in detail. The prospect of something new and interesting set fire to Pep's ambition in the usual way. Frank read a wistful appeal in his eyes, and said:

"If you can arrange the afternoon ushering, Pep, we'd like to have your company on our trip."

"Oh, that's easy as rolling off a log!" declared the delighted Pep. "There are two good fellows I know who will be glad to earn a little extra money 'subbing' for me. I say, Frank, this new boy is worth something, isn't he?" added Pep, as he followed his friend and Mr. Strapp to the street.

"Yes, Sawyer astonishes me with the experience he has had for a boy so young," replied Frank. "I'm very glad we got hold of him, for I think he is going to be a great help in our business."

"It sounds good about this Riverside Grove," observed the ranchman, as Frank outlined their choice of routes in reaching the place. Finally, having crossed a ferry, they decided to engage a taxicab and were soon spinning along the superb roads paralleling the broad river.

The sturdy Westerner grumbled as usual as the machine made speed he was unused to, but observed that it "would be a fine road for a lively mustang!" Pep was entranced at the lovely scenery. They passed several enclosed spots, the gateways of which bore lurid titles of the dancing pavilions beyond, gaudy ornamentations and streamers announcing a near opening date.

"I understand these places draw quite a crowd," said Frank, "but we want to have something that doesn't look cheap and tawdry."

"There're enough ways of getting here quickly and cheaply, it looks to me," remarked Pep, as the chauffeur slowed up at a break in the road. From a lofty height they viewed a wonderful panorama of land and water, city and country. Steam and electric roads cut the landscape in every direction, a good many of them touching at or near the pleasure resorts lining the river, where ferry-boats to and from the city were constantly plying.

"I'm in love with all this as far as scenery goes," observed Mr. Strapp. "If the business end of it will pan out, I reckon we've struck a new camping spot."

"There's a good many little towns to draw from, I notice, too," said Pep. "We're nearing the place," he added—"see there."

At the railroad depot of quite a good sized settlement a large painted sign bore a pointing finger and the words: "*To Riverside Grove.*"

"I see a good many trails leading up that hill yonder," spoke the observant Westerner. "There must have been some crowds here last year, judging from that."

"And say, there's something going on here now, I should say!" cried Pep, as the automobile came on a great wooded plateau, the edge of which looked down the side of the verdure-covered Palisades.

The spot before the occupants of the automobile was splendidly laid out. Some two hundred acres were enclosed by a wire fence over eight feet high. An elaborate archway spanned the broad entrance to the grounds. Mr. Strapp and the boys left the automobile and passed through.

The place was at present given up to workmen. All over the place saws were droning and hammers banging. A dozen new features were under construction or being rejuvenated after going through the storms of the winter. The smell of paint and oil was everywhere, mingled with the smoke of burning rubbish. The place was a little city in itself, alive with bustle and progress.

"I wish I owned a big place like this," re-

marked Mr. Strapp. "The company running the park must see some profit ahead to go to all this expense."

"There's a shooting gallery," said the interested Pep, his eyes everywhere. "See that dancing pavilion, too."

"And they're putting up a roller coaster alongside that merry-go-round," added Frank.

"It will certainly be an up-to-date place when they get everything in order," said Mr. Strapp.

For fully half an hour he and the boys went over the extensive grounds. There was certainly a lot to see. What was most pleasing was the free airiness of nature, the unconfined booths, the neat refreshment pagodas and seats under arbors and wide-spreading trees.

Pep drifted away from his companions for a few minutes to engage in conversation with a man wearing a badge on his coat, the sole watchman of the grounds at the present time. In a few minutes he rejoined the others in a state of great excitement.

"Say, I've found out a lot!" he declared. "That man I was talking to was here all last season. He says the company now in control is going to spend a heap of money advertising the place and making a success of it. He says any number of people come here from nearby towns.



And they didn't have any motion picture show here last year."

"Then in my opinion we had better set about seeing if we can't start one this year," said Mr. Strapp.

"It is certainly an ideal spot," agreed Frank. "I consider it the very best proposition we have yet come across in the movies line."

## CHAPTER VII

### JUST IN TIME

"BUSINESS, Durham!" exclaimed Mr. Strapp in his bustling way. "It's in the air; I can feel it working. Let's reduce this situation to a definite basis and see if there's anything in it for us."

Frank needed little urging to follow the direction of the excitable Westerner. There was no doubt in his mind that Dave Sawyer had made a suggestion of great value to them when he told them about the present proposition. The location was perfect. Judging from the way work was going on, a liberal management was bent upon making the place a success. It was only a question as to getting the crowds started for the new pleasure spot.

"We had better see the manager or some one in charge here," suggested Frank. "There seems to be a little office building near the entrance."

"Go and see what you can find out, will you, Durham?" spoke Mr. Strapp.

He and Pep strolled about the place leisurely for some time. The more they saw of it the better they liked it. Pep especially was all enthusiasm over the prospects.

"Just think of it—an outdoor entertainment all the time!" he exuberated. "And no stinting for space here. There's a dandy spot for a motion picture show, just off the main road, Mr. Strapp. That little knoll rises as if it was especially built to accommodate benches and give the back rows as good a view as the front ones. Here comes Frank. What about it?" asked Pep eagerly.

"This proposition looks better and better the more I see of it," was the reply. "The manager is that promoter Sawyer told us about. It looks, though, as if he is trying to sell stock more than manage the show here. He's got an assistant who knows nothing at all about running a place like this, but he was accommodating enough to me. He showed me the plat of the grounds.

"A lot of concessions have been let and no photo playhouse feature as yet. He told me, though, that Purtelle had been negotiating with some Philadelphia people to start one, but nothing definite had come of it, and if we had any idea of coming here we'd better get in ahead of others. He wanted me particularly to look at that place

over yonder marked out with the white stakes," explained Frank, pointing.

"Why, we were just looking at that and saying what a fine place it was for a show!" exclaimed Pep.

"It is, indeed," said Frank, and he showed a blue print plat of the grounds. "The company will put up any reasonable kind of a temporary building, furnishing the workmen if we will supply the material and give them a percentage on our business."

"Huh! I should think they would," observed Pep.

"That's a little too steep, I must say," added Mr. Strapp.

"Or they will lease us the ground at a round price and buy the building at the end of the season," Frank explained further. "I've got a memorandum of the terms."

"When are they going to be ready to open up?" asked Pep.

"The first of the month. The agent, whose name is Davis, says that they are going to advertise Riverside Grove in a big way and get special rates for visiting crowds by water and rail. It really looks good, if they do all they are promising."

There was a roofed platform nearby and here

a man had installed a coffee urn, some rough board tables and benches and a small show case filled with sandwiches and pies. He appeared to be one of the concessionaires who had arrived ahead of time, and was doing quite a business with the workmen about the park and casual visitors.

"We'll go over there and have a bite while we rest and talk over affairs," suggested the Westerner.

The coffee was piping hot and good, and the brisk run from the city and the novelty of the sylvan scene about them provided good appetites. The trio enjoyed their outdoor meal and then Mr. Strapp and Frank went over the figures and details given to the latter by the man in charge of the grounds.

"I don't think we need waste any time on deciding, Durham," said the ranchman finally. "So far as I am concerned I am willing to make a try at the proposition. It may go big, and if it does we're in for a fair profit. If it doesn't, we can't lose a great deal. One thing though! No business on shares with the company outside of admission percentages."

"Then we will have to put up our own building," reminded Frank.

"I would much rather do so," answered Mr.

Strapp. "All we need is a mere shell, more to shut out the general crowd than keep patrons in."

"The terms of the ground lease are certainly very fair," said Frank.

"What about another show?" inquired Mr. Strapp.

"There may be one—but only the two. If a second one is allowed, it's to be beyond the dancing pavilion."

"I'd give two to one for this location," remarked Mr. Strapp.

"So would I," agreed Frank. "I really think we had better take the option before some one else comes along. If we are going to be on hand when Riverside Grove opens, we will have to lose no time in getting things in order."

"That's so. Well, we'll go and see the manager and close the deal with him at once."

Pep, much delighted, accompanied Frank and Mr. Strapp to the office of the grounds. The agent, Davis, was authorized to close matters up with them, he said, and proceeded to fill out a blank contract. Then Frank made out a check for the forfeit money and the transaction was concluded.

"I suppose we can get what labor we require at a fair price on the grounds here when we ship



our material for the building?" questioned Frank.

"Oh, sure," responded Davis. "Hold on—here is Mr. Purtelle now. He will be glad to know that we are going to have a first class moving picture show on the grounds."

Frank and his friends stood aside as a brisk, loudly dressed and loud-talking man entered the office. He was accompanied by an undersized, shrewd-looking fellow.

"Get out the plat, Davis," ordered the manager of Riverside Grove. "This is Mr. Slavin. Runs the Bijou at Philadelphia. I've promised him the movies concession nearest the gateway and——"

"Why, I'm sorry, sir," observed Davis subserviently, "but it's taken."

"Taken!" echoed Purtelle in a surprised way.

"Yes, sir," explained his assistant. "You know you told me to close out space whenever I could. This young gentleman here, Mr. Frank Durham, of the Empire, New York City, has just signed a contract for the season."

"I don't like to be made a fool of in this way!" growled the man designated as Slavin. "I've come a long way to get this concession and I'm willing to pay for it."

"I'm afraid we can't go back on the deal now,

Mr. Slavin," said Purtelle. "There's the same concession left open, only it's a little further from the entrance. It's right up near the dancing pavilion, though, and you know that means the biggest crowd on the grounds, always."

"All right, you can show it to me," growled Slavin, with a scowling glance at Frank and his friends.

"We got in just in time, it appears," remarked Mr. Strapp.

"Good thing," commented Pep. "That fellow Slavin looks sour enough and mean enough to scare away an audience. I should not like him for a business neighbor."

"Well, it looks as though two shows could run here and make money," said Mr. Strapp. "It's up to us to be brisk about getting ready for the opening—hey, Durham?"

"Yes," responded Frank, "we will have to crowd things to have a building up in ten days. We'll take another route back," he spoke to the chauffeur, "so we can get an idea of what small town trade we can count on."

The district was so near to the city that they found a pretty thickly settled section and the prospects of building up a direct neighborhood trade were quite encouraging.

Pep was chattering volubly, suggesting all

kinds of pleasure and profit in the undertaking, when the chauffeur suddenly checked the speed of the car. They were traversing a winding, bush-lined road at the edge of a ravine, when a frantic outcry caused the passengers in the machine to gaze curiously about them.

“Help me out! I’m dead—killed—eggs and all!” cried a voice, proceeding apparently from directly below the ground.

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE "AIRDROME"

FRANK was out of the automobile in an instant, followed by Pep. Mr. Strapp stared vaguely about.

"It sounded right over yonder," said the chauffeur, pointing to what looked like a clump of thick, heavy grass.

"Hello!" shouted Pep, making a speaking trumpet of his hands—"holler again!"

"Help—half killed—eggs!" came in a muffled and confused jumble, which directed Frank to the spot the driver of the machine had indicated.

"Say, it's some kind of a pit," exclaimed Pep, crowding close to Frank and peering beyond the matted clumps of grass he was pulling aside.

Then both could see a rather deep excavation, at the bottom of which a hatless old man was standing, sustaining himself by leaning against one side of the pit.

"Get me out!" he bawled at the first sight of daylight and rescuers. "You'll have to get a

rope, for I've hurt one leg. I reckon my ankle's broken."

"Wait," directed Frank, and left Pep, to re-join the chauffeur at the machine.

"How did you ever stumble into that pit?" inquired Pep.

"Humph!" retorted the victim of the mishap, "anybody would shy at a reckless fellow on a motorcycle coming lickety-switch around the corner of the road here. I did. It was the eggs I was afraid of. There was fourteen dozen of 'em. It was to save them that I jumped aside. Then I went down and the eggs went skithering. Can't you find 'em?" added the speaker anxiously.

"We'll get you out of here first," explained Pep. "That's a good idea," he declared, as Frank appeared with a wire emergency cable from the handy box of the auto. "I'll go down and help boost the old fellow, Frank. You attend to this end."

The victim was bungling and clumsy and uttered a good many groans before they got him safely out of the pit. He limped as he was supported to the machine by Frank and the chauffeur.

"Where do you live, friend," inquired Pep—"near here?"

"Yes, first farm down the road. Drat that fellow on the motorcycle! And my eggs!"

"Here they are," announced Pep, after a brief search about the spot. "You must have let go of that basket with an easy swing, for it landed in the crotch of that broken tree just over the edge of the incline here. I don't think even one of them is broken."

"Now, that is just fine!" piped the old farmer in a relieved tone. "Say, you're a capital crowd. Going to take me home? I don't know how to thank you, but if you live near here——"

"We don't," answered Pep, "but we may some day—down at Riverside Grove."

"That so?" piped the farmer with animation. "Well, when you get settled there you just let me know, and I'll send you a crate of prime eggs that will make your mouths water."

Frank saw to it that the old man was comfortably placed in the cushioned seat and the basket of eggs stowed safely beside him.

"Chicken once in a while, too," chattered on the old man. "Could have sent you some hares, own raising, if I hadn't sold 'em all. Ever eat a Belgian hare?"

"I haven't. I'd like to, though," replied the ever-ready Pep.

"No more of 'em for me!" announced the



farmer, with a wry grimace. "I'm Cyrus Dabb. Inquire anywhere around here about me and they'll tell you I'm the man who couldn't leave experiments alone, but went to raising Belgian hares. I raised 'em, a good thriving family of them, and sunk about half I'm worth in the pesky critters that nobody would buy."

"Didn't pay, eh?" inquired Mr. Strapp.

"I should say not. Here we are. If you'll just drive up so I can get off at the hitching block, I reckon I can shift to get into the house and get some liniment on this pesky foot of mine."

Two men came out as they saw the automobile stop, and Frank and Pep helped the old man out of the machine. The farmer had two or three twinges of pain, but he paused to invite all hands to stop and have a "home-made snack" any time they passed his place. Then his natural curiosity impelled him to remark:

"So you're some of the show people down at the Grove, hey? What you going to have—circus, merry-go-round, shoot-the-chutes?"

"Oh, we're movies people," Pep replied.

"Movin' picter show, you mean?"

"That's it," assented Frank. "You must come and see us when we get started."

"Say—hi, there, Bob!" suddenly called out

the farmer to one of the two advancing farm hands, "roll a barrer up here quick as you can. You're going to have a building, aren't you?" he propounded with a great deal of animation, as though some brilliant idea had been suddenly suggested to him.

"Yes—an outdoor enclosure," explained Frank.

"It's lucky you struck me," declared the farmer, excitedly. "Here," to his man, who came up with the wheelbarrow at that moment, "load me aboard. I can manage."

The two men got Mr. Dabb in as comfortable a position in the wheelbarrow as was possible.

"Now then, roll me over along to the old lumber pile. Say, you come with me," he told his new friends.

"Wonder what he's got in his noddle now?" whispered Pep to Frank.

They stared hard as walking around a long barn they came upon a great pile of thin, sheet-iron sections heaped one upon the other, man high and extending the length of the structure—fully one hundred feet. The sheets were corrugated, had snaps, hinges and catches and were about twelve feet in length and half as broad. They looked as if at some time or other they had formed a part of a temporary farm structure.

"See here," spoke the farmer, so full of his subject that he seemed to have forgotten all about his injured leg, "you've given me a great idea and maybe we can do business together—hey?"

"In what way, Mr. Dabb?" inquired Frank with a pleasant smile, and half guessing what was in the mind of the old man.

"Well, you're going to have to put up some kind of a building for your picter show, you said?"

"Yes, we will have to plan for that and we shall have to do some quick work to have it done in time," assented Mr. Strapp, who had kept close up with his partners. "Why, my friend?"

"Well, you see all this truck here? It's the stuff that goes to make up a portable house. There was enough of it to build an enclosure two hundred feet long for them Belgian hares, drat 'em! They cost me a heap of money. If you're thinking of setting up an open air house, there's enough material there to provide for a whole county."

"Why, say," cried Pep, "the very thing!"

Mr. Strapp pressed the arm of his impetuous young friend warningly, for he saw the shrewd face of the old farmer brighten.

"Tell you," resumed the latter, "if you're going to put up a place of that sort, I wish you'd

figure with me. There's pillars and bracing rods that go with the truck. And say, up in the barn is the biggest umbrella you ever saw. It's the canvas kiver we sot over the hare house in cold weather. All it needs is a coat of tar and a little patchin', and you're shut in as cozy as if there wa'n't sech a thing as storm, wind or rain."

The suggestion was certainly a timely and valuable one—Frank saw this at once. Here at hand was a stock of material closely adapted to their purpose.

"Mr. Dabb," he said," of course we have got to build some kind of an enclosure and I'll say to you frankly we are taken with what you have here. What are you asking for the material, just as it lies?"

"Tell you," replied the farmer, "I've got the bills of what that truck cost me, and I bought purty close to cash down on the nailhead. I'll allow twenty-five per cent. for wear and tear. Then I'll split the balance cost price right in two."

"Say," spoke up Mr. Strapp, "will you leave that offer open for two days?"

"For a week, for you folks," replied the farmer readily.

"You shall hear from us within forty-eight hours," promised the Westerner, and there was

a smile of satisfaction on his face as they returned to the automobile.

"Did you ever hear of such luck!" piped Pep, as they sped on their way back to the city.

"Well, that's what comes of being good Samaritans!" chuckled Mr. Strapp.

They all felt that they had made a fine start in their new enterprise. About all they talked about the rest of the day was the Riverside Grove project. Dave Sawyer was proud and pleased to think that he had given his friends "a tip" that had led to so much satisfaction.

Frank, Randy and Pep had quarters at a small hotel a few blocks from the Empire. They occupied a large room with three cots in it.

That night Pep's head was so full of the new movies venture, that he kept talking about it until Randy fired a pillow at him and threatened a shower bath if he did not let them go to sleep.

But Pep found it difficult to close his eyes. It must have been after midnight when Frank started up at the sound of a crash in the room. Randy roused up sleepily.

"Hey! what was that?" he challenged.

"It's me," explained Pep breathlessly—"tumbled over a chair."

"But what in the world are you up to roving

around at this unearthly hour?" demanded Frank.

"Say, I've found it!" cried Pep, buoyantly. "I've been thinking of it for two hours and I've got it at last."

"Got what?" droned the drowsy Randy.

"A name—the name for our new stand at Riverside Grove. It's a good one—hurrah!"

"Well, what is it?" asked Frank.

"The Airdrome!" cried Pep, in a tone of triumph.

## CHAPTER IX

### FRIENDS IN PERIL

"So that's going to be the name of the new movies, is it?" spoke Dave Sawyer.

" 'Airdrome,' yes," replied Pep Smith, and rather grandly, too. "Isn't it a fine one? I invented it myself. There's been aerodromes and hippodromes, but 'Airdrome' just applies to an outdoor photo playhouse, don't you see?"

"It's fine," declared Dave warmly. He had come to be a great friend of Pep.

"It ought to be called the Sawyerdrome!" suggested Pep, whimsically. "Why, see here, if it hadn't been for your suggestion we might never have heard of the glorious Airdrome of Riverside Grove."

"I'm glad I helped," said Dave, modestly. "I only hope I'll get a berth at the Grove. I was out one season with an open air show and had a famous time. Why, what's the trouble?" Dave suddenly interrupted himself as a speeding figure



came hurrying through the doorway into the Empire, where Pep and himself were folding some advertising circulars.

"Why, it's little Ruth!" ejaculated Pep, recognizing the sister of Benny Burns, the cripple.

"I wish you'd come," panted the excited child, breathlessly. "Benny says to hurry right away. He wants to tell you something."

Pep made for the door at once. Since the day when the automobile had upset the flower stand of the little workers, the motion picture chums had seen a good deal of Benny and his sister. That episode had brought them closer together. The orphans were so helpless and innocent that they appealed to everybody around the Empire.

The story of their wicked half-uncle had particularly interested Frank. He knew that Benny was earnest and truthful, and it was certain that the missing Jasper Patterson had greatly wronged the waifs. Mr. Strapp had settled an overdue bill they owed at the place where they bought their flowers, and had told Benny that he must come to him for help when trade was poor. The little cripple accepted the aid so generously offered. However, in a business-like way he had insisted on giving "his note" with all gravity.

Dave ran after Pep, who soon reached the corner. Benny looked expectant and flustered. He was scanning the opposite side of the street, and said:

"It's a shame to bother you, but I'm bothered about something, and you know Mr. Durham said he was our good friend."

"Yes, indeed, Benny," replied Pep, promptly. "We've sort of adopted you people, you know, and we're interested in all of your troubles."

"That's very good of you," said Benny, gratefully. "Well, I've got quite a story to tell. Maybe it doesn't amount to much, but I'm sort of uneasy about what's been happening, and I thought you people ought to know. So I sent for you to take a look at a man who has been loitering about here since yesterday. He stood across the street looking in our direction for a long time, but he's gone now."

"Why, who is he, Benny?" asked Pep, wondering what all this was going to lead to.

"You see, I don't know," answered Benny, "but Ruth and I thought if you got a good look at him you might follow him and find out. You know I can't run, or even walk very fast."

"Go on with your story, Benny," directed Pep.

"Well, about a year ago when Ruth and I were having a pretty hard time getting along, a man

who looked like a lawyer came snooping around the tenement where we lived. He asked the neighbors all about us, how we lived, and all that. He tried to find out if we had any friends, and if we had seen a lawyer about that stolen fortune of ours. He wanted to know if we talked much about our half-uncle, Jasper Patterson."

"He must have been a spy sent by Patterson to find out if you were trying to look him up," suggested Pep.

"Yes, we thought that, too. Then the man never came around again, so we forgot all about it until this man I'm telling you about appeared yesterday."

"What did he say or do, Benny?"

"It was when I was away after flowers. He came up to the stand here and bought a dollar's worth of roses. He gave a two-dollar bill to pay for them and wouldn't take any change. Then he got talking with Ruth. He asked her all about how we got along. He wanted to know, too, about our having friends interested in us, and, never suspecting anything Ruth talked pretty freely, I guess."

"Whoever it is," said Pep, thoughtfully, "he's on the same errand the other fellow was a year ago."

"Maybe, yes—I guess you're right," agreed

Benny in a puzzled tone. "Well, when I was away this morning who should come to the stand again but this same man. He bought some more flowers and was all smiles. Then he told Ruth that he knew a friend who would buy out our stand at a good price if we would sell it. He asked a lot about me and actually got Ruth to believe that if I could go to a climate like California I might get well and strong as anybody. He said he was very much interested in us, and maybe he could get a friend out near San Francisco to pay our fare there and put us in charge of a splendid flower stand in a grand hotel where lots of rich people came."

"Aha! He did, did he?" cried Pep, all kinds of vague suspicions running riot in his mind. "Say, I want Frank to know all about this. I bet he'll see, just as I do, that some one is trying to get you away from New York City for some reason or other."

Pep turned to go back to the Empire, full of the subject of the moment, when Benny caught his arm and spoke in a low voice.

"Say," he whispered hastily, "don't turn around or take any notice just yet. Act as if you were looking at the flowers. The man I was telling you about just turned the corner on the

other side of the street. He's walking slow and looking over here."

"Maybe he's coming over," suggested Pep, impatient to turn and get a view of the man, but pretending to select some of the flowers.

"No, he isn't. I don't think he will, except when I'm away. Now he's moved on a bit and his back is to us. You can look now. See, it's the fellow with the gray hat and the umbrella under his arm."

"Yes, I see him," said Pep, taking a cautious look. "And I'd know him again anywhere," he added.

"Say, wait—where are you going?" broke in Benny excitedly.

"I'm going to find out who that man is, where he comes from, where he goes and who sent him here, and why. Oh, pshaw!"

Pep was disturbed. He had acted rashly and saw that he had made what Ben Jolly would call "a bad break." As he started for the curb the man he was watching turned and fixed his eyes directly on the stand and those near it.

The strange man almost instantly started on again and Pep felt sure that his suspicions had been aroused and that he was trying to get out of range of observation.

The minute the man's back showed, however,

Pep was out in the street, dodging flying vehicles, and all the time trying not to lose sight of the man he was after.

Suddenly he was caught up and flung on his face. The fender of an auto truck had swept him off his feet. Pep leaped up unhurt, gained the curb and gazed anxiously ahead of him.

"I've lost him; the man is gone," he mused ruefully. "It's too bad!"

He ran as far as the next corner and gazed down the length of the intersecting street. The crowds confused him, however, and he gained no further sight of the sinister-looking stranger.

Pep went at once to the Empire. Frank was busy in the little office, and alone. In his excitable way Pep narrated the incident of the hour and it made his chum look thoughtful.

"I think as you do, Pep," said Frank, "that this doesn't mean any good for the Burns children."

"No, my idea is that some one is working for that rascal, Jasper Patterson, and is trying to get the children out of the city or break them up in business—maybe kidnap them. I think, too, that they've found out that you and Mr. Strapp are interested in them and they're afraid some of us may try to get Benny and his sister their rights."

"We mustn't lose sight of those two chil-

dren," said the Westerner seriously, an hour later, when in turn he was apprized of the incident. "Even if we have to take them down with us to Riverside Grove we had better have them under our sheltering wing until we find out if any one is trying to harm them. As soon as we get the Airdrome in running order, I'm going to get some smart lawyer to see what he can do towards running down this Mr. Jasper Patterson."

All that day and the one following both Pep and Randy kept a close eye on the corner stand when Benny left little Ruth alone while he went after his flower supply. Dave kept a watch out from inside the drug store. He had been instructed as to what to do if the visitor of the previous day reappeared, but this the man did not do.

Ben Jolly put in an appearance at the Empire just after the last film the following evening. He reported that Hal Vincent was getting affairs in prime condition down at Seaside Park. Then all hands attacked a pop-corn lunch in the little office while they discussed the new venture at Riverside Grove.

Frank had been there that afternoon. His chums knew that he had a lot to tell, for on a previous visit he had closed the bargain for the



portable house with Farmer Dabb, and the construction of the Airdrome was fairly begun.

"How do things look at Riverside Grove, Durham?" questioned Mr. Strapp.

"Fine," reported Frank—"more promising than ever. They're pushing things and a regular show city is springing up."

"Say, Frank," broke in Pep, "that man from Philadelphia—you know who I mean, the one we got ahead of in closing up the movies concession—did he take the other stand?"

"You mean the man called Slavin?" asked Frank. "Yes, he is to be our business rival at the Grove."

"Hey! what's the matter, Sawyer?" asked Randy sharply.

All stared at Dave. As Frank made his last announcement, the boy uttered a cry and seemed to shrivel up in his chair.

## CHAPTER X

### MYSTERIOUS DAVE SAWYER

“THERE he is! That’s him! Let me out!”

“Nonsense, Pep! What would Dave Sawyer be doing here? Hold on!” but Pep Smith was gone.

Four days had passed since the evening when the motion picture chums and their friends had discussed their plans for a summer season at the Airdrome at Riverside Grove. A shifting scene of great variety and interest had come into their experience. Frank, Randy, Pep, Ben Jolly and Mr. Strapp were now in the midst of it. The spot where the excited announcement of Pep was made was upon a lonely country road less than a mile from the pleasure park.

Frank was driving a light wagon. The vehicle was loaded with a variety of iron fixtures and fittings belonging to Farmer Dabb. Pep sat on the front seat beside Frank and Ben Jolly occupied a cushion of bags on top of the load in the

wagon box. It was pretty well on towards dusk. Pep had been chattering with great spirit over the doings at the Grove. Suddenly he paused and looked ahead along the road. Then came his outcry, and now he added to it, as he leaped from the wagon:

“Hey, you! Stop! Wait! Say, I know you, and here’s Frank!”

The figure of a boy a hundred yards ahead turned around. So quickly did he do this, however, and then reverse and break into a run, that the peering boys caught only a fleeting glimpse of his face. Pep, however, started up promptly, with the confident announcement:

“It’s he; don’t you see that for yourself, Frank? Hey, Sawyer, I know you! I want to see you—thunder! it’s pretty plain he doesn’t want to see us, and that makes it more mysterious than ever.”

Pep had a reason for being excited. When Frank in the talk at the Empire about Airdrome affairs had spoken the name of Slavin, the man who was to be their rival at Riverside Grove, the effect upon Dave Sawyer had been fairly startling.

At the time Frank had noticed this, as had the others. From the first, however, Frank had observed that Dave was a strangely sensitive lad.

So far he had given his new friends only half-confidences, but for all this they had accepted him as a trusted companion. Still, Frank had followed the policy of refraining from pressing Dave to tell all about his troubles. When he had noticed his manifest trepidation at the mention of Slavin's name he had changed the conversation.

Almost at once Dave had arisen from his seat and with a troubled face left the little office of the Empire. He had not returned in over half an hour. Then anxiety and the curiosity of the others led to their looking for their missing assistant.

Dave was nowhere about the photo playhouse. He had vanished. Frank hoped he would show up the next morning, but Dave did not put in an appearance. In the letter-box, however, there was a folded note scrawled in pencil and addressed to Frank. It read:

"I thought I had landed with both feet in the right spot; but it won't do. It's better for me to make a new shift, for your sake, and because perhaps I can do you some good."

The note was signed with Dave's initials. Frank studied it and showed it to his friends, but they could make nothing of it. Frank, who understood the nature of Dave better than the

others, fancied he read between the lines. He believed that Slavin, whom they had met at Riverside Grove, must be the man Dave had hinted at as the employer who had so abused him. Perhaps Dave feared this Slavin; perhaps the latter had some hold on him or his father. If this were true, it was quite natural that the boy, knowing they were going to locate at Riverside Grove, was afraid and had decided to leave his new position.

Frank missed the cheery Dave and Pep and Randy actually mourned him. Mr. Strapp had put himself out of the way in making Dave feel at home after hearing as much of his forlorn story as Frank could tell.

"I began my hard life about as friendless as Sawyer," the big-hearted ranchman had said. "I'm studying him. I think there's good stuff in him, and if that's so, and he sticks to us, I'm going to help him make something of himself."

It was two days after that when the arrangements were made for the actual beginning of the work at the Airdrome. Hal Vincent had a week of leisure to put in before he started in with the show at Seaside Park. He was given charge of the Empire and set himself at work to organize a new working force there. Mr. Strapp fluctuated between the Grove and the city. Frank

managed to spare an hour or two each day to run down to the Empire and look over things. Practically, however, he and his chums and Ben Jolly were permanently installed at the scene of their new venture.

The Airdrome was now in the hands of a squad of workmen. The boys joined them, for there were many odd jobs they could do to help along. Then again Frank had ideas as to the form and conveniences of the Airdrome, which he could suggest only as the construction progressed.

The sheet metal sections that had once enclosed the rabbit warren of Farmer Dabb had been delivered in hayracks by his hired men. That afternoon Frank, Pep and Jolly had obtained one of the wagons working about the Grove, and had gone down to the Dabb farm to cart over to the Airdrome a lot of fittings that went with the metal sheets. Now, staring wonderingly after Pep, Frank brought the horse to a sharp halt.

"Say, there may be something in what Pep says," spoke Jolly, as he too leaped to the ground. "If it really is that friend of yours he talks about so much, you want particularly to see him, don't you, Durham?"

"Why, we are all interested in him," replied Frank. "There—see: he knows he is being chased and is bent on getting out of the way."

"I reckon I'll take a hand in the hunt," said Jolly. "It may turn out to be interesting."

The boy in pursuit of whom Pep had started so diligently had made a break through the underbrush lining the edge of the road, headed for a thicket some little distance away. Pep was hot on his trail, but Jolly did not take the direction they followed. He started an independent run from the spot where the horse had been halted, as if intent on heading off the fugitive. Within two minutes, first one and then the others in the scene before him faded from Frank's view. All he could do, therefore, was to await patiently the outcome.

Meantime the fugitive had utterly ignored the hails of Pep. He did not turn a second time, but sprinted for all he was worth. A glance sideways, however, must have shown him a new pursuer in Ben Jolly. He redoubled his efforts, made a false step, stumbled, and then, after a few hundred yards of further progress, dived into a thicket and disappeared.

"You run around that way, Mr. Jolly," shouted Pep, breathlessly, "and I'll head him off if he makes a break to get away on this side."

"All right," said Jolly. "I reckon we've got the lad cornered; but what for?"

"I want to talk to him; Frank wishes to see



him. There's something mysterious the matter with him. He's a fine fellow, and we want to help him out."

Pep dashed away, following the edge of the thicket around to the other side. Then finding no trace of either Jolly or Dave, he struck in among the bushes. Proceeding more slowly, he fancied he heard a rustling nearby. He stood stock-still. The shrubbery parted.

"Hush! just subside for a bit, Pep Smith," spoke a voice, and Ben Jolly was revealed, his finger uplifted warningly as he drew nearer to his young friend. "I've run the game to earth," he added, in a still lower tone.

"You mean Dave Sawyer?"

"That's him," nodded Jolly. "He's got a burrow, but I know where. See here, Pep, you're a smart, willing fellow, but we don't want to spoil things. I reckon this Sawyer is a hard case to deal with."

"Well, he's peculiar—yes," agreed Pep; "but you see he knows me and likes me——"

"That's all right," interrupted Jolly, "but you'd better give me the first chance to chat with him. You keep in the background."

"All right," assented Pep, and Jolly retreated as cautiously as he had appeared. He reached a cleared spot where across the grass lay what re-

mained of a great hollow tree. Jolly picked up a branch, advanced and began beating hard on its sides.

“Hey! wake up there, my friend!” he cried.  
“I want to have a little conversation with you.”

## CHAPTER XI

### THE AIRDROME

OUT from his hiding-place crawled Dave Sawyer. He brushed the wood fibres from his clothing and confronted Ben Jolly with a half smile upon his face.

"Well," he remarked, "I've come out. Did you want to see me about anything particular?"

"Why, I fancy you guess what," replied Jolly, looking at the boy keenly. "If you are Dave Sawyer—and I don't think you will deny that you are—you've got some mighty good friends. Being such, you can guess they would be glad to see you."

The lad's face sobered instantly. He sat down on the log and began kicking up the dirt with the toe of his shoe in an embarrassed way.

"My name is Jolly—Ben Jolly," pursued Frank's messenger. "Frank Durham, whom you know, didn't exactly send me after you; but he'd be more than glad if he saw you walking back to the wagon with me."

"Oh, I've heard of you!" cried Dave in a pleased way. "Yes, indeed, I have. You're a great friend of the crowd and they think the world of you."

"Is that so?" returned Jolly. "Well, from what Pep Smith tells me they've tried to share their kindness with you also. Now, my boy," and Jolly placed a gentle hand on Dave's shoulder, "don't be foolish. Don't you see that all this mystery is bothering the best fellow in the world—Frank Durham."

Dave kept his eyes upon the ground, but Jolly saw that he was moved at the appeal. Before he could follow it up, however, Dave arose to his feet, the corners of his lips twisted and a resolute expression in his eyes.

"Mr. Jolly," he said, "you good people are taking entirely too much thought about me and my tangled affairs. There is no mystery, or deep, dark secret, or anything of that sort. It's a dead open and shut business, where I've got to do some squirming on my own hook until I get things worked out."

"But, see here," observed the piano player, "if you're in trouble or need advice or friends, why don't you come out into the open and let us help you?"

"I'll tell you, Mr. Jolly," explained Dave.

"I've had to fight my way ever since I was old enough to work—and even my own family have been a pull-back. There has come about a sort of mix-up where I've got to stand alone. I'm stronger away from good friends, who would only weaken me in doing all they can possibly do, and that is to pity me. You'd understand me if you'd knocked around the world as much as I have."

"Ha! eh?" exclaimed Jolly in his energetic way—"say that again, will you? 'Knocked around the world!' Why, son, I was a rolling stone that never stopped until I landed against Frank Durham. Come, now, haven't you some word for him?"

Dave sat thinking silently for a long time. Then he looked Jolly squarely in the face.

"Yes, sir," he replied, steadily, "I've got a word for all my good Empire friends. This is it: Have confidence in me. I'm trying to work out a puzzle. Maybe I will do it; maybe I won't. Either way, I'm true blue to them. If they really want to help me, tell them not to recognize me nor misunderstand me, no matter under what circumstances they meet me."

"And you won't even see Pep—Pep Smith, your good friend?"

"Say!" cried Dave, throwing out his hands,

"you hit me in my softest spot, for to know Pep is to know a trump. But it mustn't be—not just now, anyhow. It's all going to come out straight in the end, but my course will run in a different direction from yours for a time. Tell them good luck and—and good-bye."

Dave started away as he spoke, and Jolly did not seek to detain him. He saw that he was dealing with a resolute lad, who had laid out a definite course for himself and was bound to follow it to the end.

"Hold on, Pep!" exclaimed Jolly, springing forward in time to restrain his impetuous young friend, who had burst from his covert as Dave disappeared among some shrubbery. "It won't do any good to tackle that boy. It would only make him feel bad and maybe hinder his intentions, whatever they are."

Pep grumbled a good deal as they regained the wagon. Frank listened with attention to Jolly's story of the interview with Dave.

"I don't see how Sawyer comes to be drifting around Riverside Grove," said Pep. "The way he talks and acts, you'd think he was sort of guarding us."

"Maybe he is," remarked Jolly. "Of course it's clear that all this has something to do with his old employer, Slavin, our business rival. Say,

Durham, I met the man this morning. He's got a mean look and the way he was taking in the Airdrome showed no very friendly spirit towards us, I can tell you."

The Airdrome was now so fully in the thoughts of Frank and the others that by the time they reached the Grove Dave Sawyer was pretty well out of their minds. Mr. Strapp had declared the investment with Farmer Dabb to be a lucky stroke of fortune.

"Why, if the stuff had been ordered and made for us it could not have fitted in better," he had declared.

All agreed to this when the first load of material was delivered. The building, or rather enclosure, was to be two hundred feet long. Besides this, there was a twenty-foot space allowed for an entrance platform abutting the broad street, and thirty feet at the back for the construction of any small buildings that might be needed.

The metal sheets were over eleven feet in height. These locked together, and every fifteen feet long rods were driven into the ground to give support to the general construction.

The wagon Frank drove brought along fittings and fixtures used in locking the sheets firmly, and



hinges to be used where emergency exits were placed in the fence.

"It begins to look like something, doesn't it, now?" asked Pep, as they drove up.

"Looms up big," agreed Jolly. "It's going to be some Airdrome, Durham, and no mistake. Just see the chance to fix up an attractive entrance."

"I looked over the canvas roof this morning," said Frank, "and had an expert give me some advice."

"Yes, I saw you with that Mr. Artingstall, who was the manager here until they picked out Purtelle," observed Pep. "It's too bad about him. It seems that he moved his whole family here from Baltimore, expecting an all-season job. They kept him just a week, when this Purtelle came along and got his place. Mr. Artingstall is looking for a situation again, and about all he has struck so far is odd jobs about the grounds."

"Well, he knows all about amusement park pavilions," explained Frank, "and has given me a lot of good advice and useful suggestions. He has taken the contract to tar over the canvas and arrange a tackle by which it can be slid over the enclosure or off the roof frame at a touch."

"That's fine!" declared Pep. "The crowds will flock into a restful place with trees all around

it, open to fresh balmy air, and the moon and stars overhead."

Besides the sheets that had constituted the rabbit warren of old Farmer Dabb there were two portable frame houses that had gone with the outfit. One of these Dabb had used for grain and the other for supplies. The latter would make an excellent kitchen, Frank decided. A larger building, which had floor space enough for a good sized sitting room, and which in addition would hold half a dozen sleeping cots, was to be set up just back of the stage, and the improvised kitchen. Randy came up and helped unload, and then the quartette stood discussing the many plans under consideration.

"Just think what a fine time we had at Seaside Park, bunking in back of the show and cooking our own meals," said Ben Jolly. "Why, it was like a regular home to me."

"Yes, and to all of us," agreed Pep. "This makes a pleasure of business—it's better than camping out."

Frank got busy among the men building the walls of the Airdrome, seeing that things were done as ordered and making suggestions here and there.

A great barn of a place near the big gateway had been arranged as a sort of hotel for the work-

men about the Grove, and for the concession people who did not wish to board at the town nearby or return each night to the city. Frank and the others had engaged a partitioned-off space, where they drove hooks in the boards and slept in hammocks. The meals were plain, but well cooked and wholesome.

Restless Pep went out to take a moonlight view of the Airdrome before retiring. He returned in a few minutes greatly excited.

"Say, Frank," he called out breathlessly, "I've seen Dave Sawyer again!"

"When? where?" inquired Randy.

"Just now, up at the Columbia. He's gone to work for that fellow, Slavin!"

## CHAPTER XII

### GETTING READY

"WELL, this is certainly real life!" said Ben Jolly.

"And the beauty of it is, we are all ready to begin business," added Randy Powell in a pleased tone.

The speakers and Frank Durham stood on the broad graveled road that ran in front of the Airdrome, viewing the results of their own active work and that of others in their service.

The Airdrome was no longer a dream, but a reality. The motion picture chums had reason to be glad that they had met Farmer Dabb. It was through their lucky bargain with him that they had been able not only to put up the Airdrome at a very small cost, but on time—in fact, ahead of time. While there were many finishing touches yet to be made, they could have given an entertainment at once had the electric wiring been completed.

The metal sheets had formed a neat enclosure.

Pep, arrayed in overalls, was helping two workmen put on a coat of light gray paint. Others were setting up the framework of the canopy extending out over the entrance. This was to be light, fanciful and pretty. On top was to be set a revolving sign that could be seen from all over the grounds.

There were eleven exits at each side of the enclosure and the doors guarding these were hinged. The idea was to half open these away from the stage, set in light iron screens and thus fresh air and a view of the outside country would be afforded to the audience. Frank explained about these and other proposed improvements, and added:

"You see, we count on evening business for the bulk of our profit. If the manager, Mr. Purtelle, gives Riverside Grove the right kind of publicity and arranges for cheap transportation from the city by water, as he says he can, we will be pretty well crowded from dusk until nearly midnight. That will be our harvest time."

"Yes, and that will be the time when our Air-drome is a real open air show," put in Randy. "Didn't you say, Frank, that we can show the films at night, even if the moon and stars are shining?"

"Always," replied Frank. "In the daytime,

though, we will have to screen the roof. The way Mr. Artingstall is arranging for us, four windlass movements will close us in overhead as snug as a roofed building."

"Oh, say!" broke in Randy, recalling an interesting bit of information fresh that morning, "I saw Dave Sawyer while I was looking around the grounds."

"That so?" observed Jolly, "then Pep was right about his being here. Up at the Columbia, I suppose, Randy?"

"Yes, they've taken the old theatre and dance hall building—that is, the upper part of it. There was a light inside where the workmen were decorating it. Sawyer was cooking coffee over a little gas stove. I guess he lives at the Columbia. Anyhow, he's surely working for that man, Slavin.

"What do you think it all means, Frank?" asked Randy, curiously. "Doesn't it look strange, Sawyer leaving us the way he did and going right in with the man who treated him so abominably?"

"Sawyer couldn't have shied away from us because he knew we were coming down here, and would bring him up against Slavin," remarked Jolly, "for, as you see, he has gone to work for him."

"I don't think we gain anything by discussing it," observed Frank, thoughtfully. "I have my own ideas as to Dave's motives. We had better say little about it and see how things develop."

"What are they doing up at the Columbia, anyway?" questioned Jolly. "I've been so busy I've had only one look at the old ramshackle building they've got."

"It's being fixed up pretty well," answered Randy, "and it's got a big hall upstairs, if they can only fill it. There's been some trouble, though, I hear."

"What's that, Randy?" asked Jolly.

"Why, they're fixing up the lower story for an ice cream parlor and sales booths—a sort of arcade. The people who rented that have cut away the old stairs to make more room and an entrance for the ice cream parlor, and I heard Mr. Artingstall, the old manager here, remark that they were using a ladder to get up stairs."

"I declare!" laughed Jolly, "that sounds odd."

"It's true, though," asserted Randy, "and Slavin never thought of getting into that fix when he leased the hall. They're going to fix it up some way, though, I hear."

"Let's take a stroll up there and see what it looks like," suggested Frank.



They started in the direction of the Columbia. It was pleasing to note the air of briskness apparent everywhere about the grounds. There was the music of hammer, saw and chisel everywhere, and workmen were hurrying to get things ready for the approaching opening night.

"Say, speed up a little," spoke Randy quickly, as they neared the Columbia. "There's some excitement going on."

"I should think there was!" exclaimed Jolly, breaking into a jog trot. "Why, it's a regular riot!"

On arriving near the old building, the friends found an exciting scene in progress. A man who seemed to be the proprietor of the downstairs space, which was being put into shape, stood in front of the place with a hammer in his hand, with two assistants armed with clubs at his side.

Randy's statement seemed true. The former stairway had been torn away and the space it occupied was being enclosed so as to give the lower story more inside room.

The only way that the Columbia people could hope to get their audience upstairs, therefore, was by building an outside entrance leading from the side. This they had started to do, for a broad section of the upper wall had been torn away. Slavin, with his usual dark scowl, was directing

some workmen who were starting to lift a big timber into place.

"You set that timber anywhere so as to obstruct the light and we'll tear it out again," the downstairs man was shouting in great wrath.

"Set it up, men!" ordered Slavin. "I know my rights. Knock down the first man who tries to interfere with you. I've sent for the manager. He'll soon settle this matter."

It seemed as though there would be a collision, but in about five minutes, Davis, the young man representing Purtelle, in charge of the grounds, hurried to the scene.

As the motion picture chums had decided the first time they saw him, he was a weak, irresolute fellow. He was not even a good echo of Purtelle, who really had some go to him, although with little system in his work.

Frank and his friends were interested enough to remain and watch the incident to the end. Davis informed the downstairs man that Slavin had a right to build any kind of an entrance to the hall he liked, from the side.

"That's all right," agreed the restaurant man, "but he won't nail any supports to my part of the building."

"Who wants to?" retorted Slavin hotly. "I've ordered a fancy stairway to be supported

by chains, but we've got to set those big timbers temporarily to build our base. Say, you're an agreeable, accommodating kind of a man, aren't you? All right! If I have to give my audiences ice cream and soda free, I'll break up your business."

"Sort of a wealthy fellow, isn't he?" observed Randy, as they moved away from the scene.

"And I don't think much of their side entrance scheme," added Ben Jolly. "They'll have to get up a pretty showy one to let the public know how to get into the place. In most big cities it would be against the fire law to let 'em give a show upstairs. We've got them beat half a dozen ways with the Airdrome."

"Everybody has his troubles," remarked Frank, "and Mr. Slavin is having his just now. I suppose ours will come along sooner or later."

One of these same, and a great big one, too, it looked at first, struck the Airdrome group, and in fact every exhibition on the grounds two afternoons later.

Things had been rushed everywhere about the grounds, and the workers on the Airdrome labored until midnight on some days getting things in the best shape possible for the opening. With all their diligent efforts, however, they

found that everything was not entirely harmonious.

All the time there had been a great deal of dissatisfaction with Manager Purtelle. He appeared only occasionally at the Grove, and then for only a short time. He left all of the business of the grounds to his assistant, Davis, who was not a capable or experienced man. The former promised recklessly, left it to Davis to carry out these pledges, and the result was confusion and disappointment.

There was no system about supplies ordered, and on the morning of the opening night the workmen were still stringing the electric wires and putting in water pipes.

Mr. Artingstall, the former manager of the grounds, dropped into the Airdrome lobby in passing.

"There's going to be some disappointment here to-night, I'm afraid," he observed, gravely.

"Why, how is that, Mr. Artingstall?" inquired Frank.

"Oh, the management is in a frightful jumble, they say. Everybody is complaining. Supplies promised for yesterday haven't arrived yet. They've just managed to get the gas connected and turned on, but I learn that some electric transformers and connections are unfinished, and

it looks as if they can't get current on until to-morrow."

"Hey! what's that?" shouted Pep, as he caught the words. "No electric lights? Then how are we going to show our films?"

## CHAPTER XIII

### A BAD FIX

"THIS is serious," said Frank. "Is there no possibility of the current being on by evening?"

"I'm telling you what I hear," replied Mr. Artingstall. "That man, Davis, the assistant manager, is all up in the air. An inexperienced person like him should never have been trusted with all this responsibility. One minute he says that the electric lights can't be ready until to-morrow. Then in the next breath he claims they will be on by dark. I notice one suspicious thing, though; his men are connecting the park with the gas mains for illumination."

"Something has got to be done," said Frank. "This is a vital matter to us."

"I should say it was!" broke in Pep, in great excitement. "Why, it would just about break things up to have no electric lights. I'd make that manager fit us out as he contracted, or I'd—I'd sue him!"

"I think I'll go and see Mr. Davis," said Frank, as Mr. Artingstall went away. "We are advertised to give an entertainment this evening—and it's got to take place, some way."

"You heard Durham," observed Jolly, as Frank left on his mission.

"It means something when he talks that way," said Pep—"it always does, though how he is going to arrange things I can't see. The projector is arranged for electricity only. He can't operate it with a calcium or gas machine, because it would take a whole day to get one here and adjust it. Here's Mr. Strapp," and Pep broke off to run out to a chugging auto that had just pulled up in front of the Airdrome.

The hardy Westerner seemed flustered as he told the chauffeur to run the car over to the vacant space behind the enclosure. He took up a little satchel as he stepped to the ground and looked around in a disturbed way.

"Where's Durham?" he inquired—almost anxiously, Jolly fancied.

"Frank has gone to see the manager of the Grove," explained Pep. "Things aren't going as smoothly as we calculated, and he's trying to better them."

"I've heard that," said Mr. Strapp in a vexed tone. "I don't know what the people in charge



are thinking of, but they're not doing what they agreed to."

"How is that, Mr. Strapp?" inquired Jolly.

"Why, where is all their promised advertising? There have been a few obscure notices in the daily newspapers, and some short advertisements announcing the opening, but none of the grand display they bragged about. They don't even mention special rates on the river. I don't believe they've made any arrangements with a steamboat line. A movies man at the Exchange told me to-day that the Grove hadn't been pushed worth a pinch of salt. That Purtelle doesn't seem to amount to much."

"And his assistant here is worse," declared Pep. "Why, Mr. Strapp, they say they can't get the electric lights on until to-morrow."

"It's a shame!" cried the ranchman, becoming angry. "Everything depends on a first impression. If a crowd goes away dissatisfied, they might just as well shut up shop. I hope Durham will be back soon. This thing is getting on my nerves."

Mr. Strapp fussed and fumed about for some minutes. The only way Jolly could get his mind off his worry was to show him how finely they had their own affairs in shape.

There were a lot of finishing touches yet to

be made about the Airdrome, but nothing was lacking in the way of neatness and comfort. Mr. Strapp was greatly pleased with the arrangements, and said so heartily.

"I'm going to find the owners of the Grove to-morrow and see that the company carries out its agreement with us," he said. "I shan't go back to the city for a day or two. Everything is moving in apple pie order at the Empire, and we must give all our time and attention here to make the Airdrome a success."

Frank returned soon afterwards. He looked serious, but it relieved Mr. Strapp to meet his trusted young lieutenant. They all listened gravely as Frank told about his investigations at the Grove office.

"That Davis is about on the edge of a nervous breakdown," said Frank. "I could make neither head nor tail of the shape he's got affairs in. He thinks the electric lights will be on, but doesn't know. I don't think they will, for he's ordered in a lot of gasoline torches. Nearly half of the concession people are crowding his office complaining of things promised and undone. We've got to make the best showing we know how, Mr. Strapp."

"What is the best?" asked the Westerner, at his wits' end.

"That's your automobile, isn't it?" inquired Frank, glancing at the car standing near.

"Yes," nodded Mr. Strapp glumly—"wish it wasn't! I've had to give in to it, though. Rather have a good fast hoss, but that seems old fashioned in these parts."

"Could I use it for about an hour?" inquired Frank.

"You don't have to ask for anything I've got—certainly. See here, though, Durham, I'm getting riled. You've done your part. If the fellows running the Grove make a miss on theirs, I'm almost tempted to wade in wild Western fashion and teach them a lesson."

"You won't have to do that, Mr. Strapp," declared Frank laughingly. "I think I see a way to mend things as far as we are concerned. The rest of the proposition has got to take care of itself. Come, Pep."

"You've got some idea in your mind, I know you have," said Pep, as Frank gave the chauffeur an order and they started from the grounds.

"I am going to find out if there is the remotest possibility of getting our electric light," explained Frank.

The plant that supplied the Grove was about a mile away. The machine stopped in front of it,

and Frank sprang out and approached a man seated in a chair outside the office.

"I would like to see the superintendent, if possible," and Frank introduced himself.

The man eyed Frank sharply, taking in Pep as well and the automobile.

"I suppose you're from the Grove?" he observed in a sulky tone.

"Yes, we are running a concession there," said Frank. "I came to inquire—"

"About the electric lights?" asked the man in an exasperated sort of a way. "I reckon you're the fifteenth or twentieth from there. Well, I'll answer your question. I suppose it's to know if we can get on the current by dark."

"Yes, that's it," answered Frank. "I hope you can give us some encouragement."

"Well, I can't," snapped the superintendent. "See here, if you want to blame anybody, go to the management up at the grounds. We started in at the contract in plenty of time and your people failed to do their part."

"How was that?" asked Frank.

"Why, we wired both ends up to the road. There was some tiling to be done and they agreed to supply the material, besides the pole standards. We told them early in the week that we must

have the supplies, but they kept putting us off and never sent for them until yesterday. They may be here by this evening, but that will be too late to do any good."

"If you could bridge the road space temporarily"—suggested Frank.

"It's too late for even that, now," replied the superintendent. "Another thing, we might forfeit our charter by doing it. No loose wires will do with the crowd moving about. No, sir—it can't be done; it won't be done. I'm sorry to disappoint you," added the speaker, "for you talk decently to a man. Some of the people who came here fired into us as if we were pirates."

"It's plain to be seen you've done your share," said Frank.

"Another thing," went on the superintendent, "we've done wonders and gone to lots of expense installing the new dynamos. We got them all in shape last night. There's the old ones and the baby dynamo for emergency work," and he pointed to a heap just outside the door of the plant. "And it's been a risk to go to all that extra investment, for if the Grove shouldn't go we can't sell the extra current anywhere else."

"Oh," said Frank in a thoughtful and interested way that at once attracted Pep's attention, "do you call that a baby dynamo?" and he took

a few steps over to the heap of dismantled machines.

"That's its name," responded the superintendent.

"I suppose a device like that costs a lot of money, doesn't it?" suggested Frank.

"New, it does. It's in good shape now, too."

"What would it be worth?" inquired Frank.

The superintendent stared hard at Frank. An expert in his line, an intimation of the purpose his questioner had in mind caused his eye to sparkle and a grim, half-smile to cross his face.

"Say," he observed, somewhat forcibly, "you're not thinking of trying to use that dynamo up at the grounds to get your electric light?"

"Yes," returned Frank simply, "I was thinking of just that. You see, we are worse off than some of the others. We run a motion picture show and we can't get along without electricity."

"Well, well," spoke the plant superintendent with a kind of a chuckle—"say, you're a smart chap!"

## CHAPTER XIV.

### A "BRIGHT" IDEA

"CAN it be done—that is the question?" mused Frank.

Pep was almost stunned as the boldness of Frank's idea suddenly dawned upon him. The superintendent stood regarding Frank rather admiringly.

"Can what be done?" the former inquired. "You mean can that dynamo be made to work in a small way? Yes. Is it for sale? No. But you've been decent to me, and I'm going to help you out. Now then, young fellow, tell me how you're fixed up at the Grove."

Frank's face brightened. If he had been disturbed and anxious before, he hoped he saw his way out of the difficulty now. He recited briefly just what the superintendent wanted to know. Frank knew the projecting machine to its smallest detail, and could describe it and its connections technically and concisely. His listener nodded



frequently as Frank talked of circuits, cut-offs, amperes and "grounders."

"I won't sell you the dynamo," he said slowly, when Frank had finished. "It would cost you a heap in the first place, and you couldn't afford the power it would require as a regular thing. Besides that, our current will be on to-morrow or next day. I'll loan you the baby dynamo, though."

"Good for you!" broke out the excitable Pep. "Mister, you're a fine man!"

The superintendent laughed at the sincere outburst. He had become interested in the two earnest young fellows.

"That dynamo isn't so bulky that it cannot be put in your auto," he said, calculatingly. "I'll tell you what I'll do; I'll give you a couple of my men who will set it up for you and charge you only cost. Wait a minute."

"Frank Durham," cried Pep, once they were alone, "you're a wizard!"

"I don't see why," replied Frank, quietly. "There's more luck than merit in finding an odd dynamo."

"Yes, but a baby dynamo, and just what can be handled quickly—and nicely. But it isn't that—it's your thinking of such a scheme. Oh, won't Mr. Strapp be delighted!"

The superintendent emerged from the plant followed by two workmen. The latter looked over the dynamo, then at the boys, then at the auto and returned to the plant. When they came out again they carried tools, a roll of leather belting and a satchel containing a variety of supplies necessary to their work.

The superintendent assisted them in building a platform on the rear automobile seat and in transferring to it the dynamo, and they started back for the Grove. The auto was run around to the side of the Airdrome. Mr. Strapp, Jolly and Randy came out wonderingly.

"Why, what in the world have you got now?" questioned Randy, for he knew from the complacent face of Frank and the happy smiles of Pep that something of importance was about to occur.

"It's a dynamo—a baby dynamo, they call it," explained Pep, jumping to the ground and looking like a victor just returned from the field of battle. "Say, Randy, Frank thinks of everything and thinks of it always in time."

"That's no news," observed Mr. Strapp, who overheard the words. "A young electric plant, eh? Where did you get it, Durham?" and the brief story that Frank told was listened to with great interest.

"But I say," resumed the Westerner, "why couldn't the electric plant people think of rigging up a dynamo somewhere on the grounds here and supply the whole show?"

"We couldn't get the power to run anything big, sir," explained one of the workmen. "Even the way we're fixed with the baby dynamo the current will be rather light."

"Where are you going to get the power for this?" asked Mr. Strapp.

"Oh, that's easy," declared Pep, who had listened attentively to the conversation of the workmen on the way to the grounds—"your automobile, of course."

"Huh!" remarked Mr. Strapp.

"Oh, yes, we can rig the auto so we can run things all right for your show here," spoke one of the workmen. "Now then, Dan," to his companion, "get the dynamo into position and we'll soon have things fixed up."

For once a technical job was in progress in which Pep could not help. His fingers fairly itched to take some part in what was going on. Then he resigned himself to watching the workmen. It was with interest and admiration that the group noted the way in which the expert electricians went at their labors.

The automobile was set upon strong blocks to

enable the wheels to run at full speed free of the ground. To one of the wheels the leather belting was adjusted, laced, and set about the fly-wheel of the dynamo.

"I begin to see," said Randy, engrossed in watching what was going on.

It took the workers some time to make all the connections, arrange transformers and explain to Frank about the various switches and the way of graduating the current. It looked very simple, now that the basic work was all done.

Frank stepped aside with the two workmen when their labors had been completed and asked them what their bill would be. It proved to be a very modest amount, based upon a regular time schedule.

"You can settle all that with the superintendent," said one of the men, but Frank slipped a bill to each, and added to their pleasure and satisfaction by commending their skill and promptness in helping the Airdrome out of a dilemma.

"And you and your family and all your relations drop in to see the show any time you're around these diggings," invited the generous hearted Westerner.

"Oh, by the way," said Frank, and he

glanced over in the direction of the Columbia. "I wanted to ask you about something," and he linked his hand in the arm of the head workman and led him away from the others. "You know the old dance hall over yonder?" and he indicated the rival photo playhouse.

"Oh, yes," responded the man. "Going to be a show like yours there too, isn't there?"

"That's it," answered Frank. "I was thinking I wouldn't like to be left in the lurch as they are going to be unless they get helped out."

"You mean in the dark!" laughed his companion.

"Well, it's one and the same thing. I was going to ask if it would be possible to share our current with those people?"

"Hey?" ejaculated the electrician, with a start of surprise. "Why, say, it appears to me you're taking a lot on your mind for people in your same line of business. I should think—"

"Oh, it's my policy to try and make everybody comfortable where I can," replied Frank.

The electrician began whistling to himself as he plunged into reflection. He traversed an imaginary sky line with his eye and made some quick mental calculations. Then he took out his watch and glanced at it.

"See here," was his final dictum, "we can

rig up a light feed line and string it on some emergency poles, but it will be a rush job and will cost something. You see, we can run a wire across that unoccupied space for a quarter of a mile, but they will have to put up a rope guard on both sides and hire some men to keep any stray people from going near the wires."

"I wish you would wait here for a few minutes," said Frank, and he sped away in the direction of the Columbia. The stairway supported by huge iron chains was nearly in place, and except that it was being gaudily trimmed was quite an attractive structure. Frank made out Slavin watching some workmen, and went up to him.

## CHAPTER XV

### THE GRAND OPENING

"MR. SLAVIN?" said Frank inquiringly, although he knew the man by sight.

"Yes. You're Durham of the Airdrome, I believe," answered Slavin in his usual abrupt fashion and with his habitual scowl.

"Yes, sir," bowed Frank. "Something came up in regard to the electric lighting and we have found a way out," and in a concise way Frank stated the situation.

"Going to run anyway, are you?" snapped Slavin, breaking in on Frank before he had finished.

"It would look pretty bad to shut up shop the first night, don't you think?" asked Frank. "It occurred to me that you might connect with our temporary current until we get the regular lights on."

"Say!" cried Slavin, fairly blazing with fury, "you run your affairs; I'll run mine. I wouldn't



have the lights in if I could get them for nothing; but I'll make the management here pay a handsome figure for failing to meet their contract."

Frank bowed courteously, although so rudely rebuffed. The pettiness of Slavin showed that his forbidding appearance did not belie his reputation. Frank dismissed the men from the electric plant when he returned to the Airdrome. He did not say anything to his friends about visiting the Columbia, although there was a questioning look in the eyes of Mr. Strapp.

There was, however, no time for idle discussion after that. The problem of electricity solved, every energy was focussed on getting ready for the evening entertainment. Even Mr. Strapp took off his coat and helped the boys. Then there was a rush for the little addition at the rear, where Pep had a hurried supper ready.

"It looks tidy and trim and inviting," pronounced Mr. Strapp. "It's a good thing we have the gas in, although it will be some trouble turning it off and on."

"There are only four inside burners," explained Pep, "but we can manage for one evening."

"Yes, the electricians said it would take a lot of work and time to connect with the house wires. They thought, too, it would be surer

and simpler to attach only for the projector," said Frank.

"You've done famously, Durham," declared Mr. Strapp, in a satisfied tone. "Sorry we can't work the revolving sign, but it looks all right on the canopy there."

They had used a lot of jets to supply gas lights on top of the canopy and at the entrance to the Airdrome. It was about 6:30 o'clock when everything was in order.

"The gates open at seven and we won't have much of a crowd until an hour later, I'm calculating," said Mr. Strapp. "Reckon I'll stroll about and see what the prospects are."

The Westerner went on his way. In a few minutes Randy walked down towards the big gate. Jolly was running over some tunes on the piano. Frank and Pep stood outside the enclosure watching the lighting up operations.

"Oh, it isn't going to be half so bad," commented Pep. "It will make the full blaze of glory to-morrow night look fine by contrast."

The main streets of the Grove were being lit every fifty feet with gasoline torches. The booths and buildings all had gas, and as they lit up the illumination made the spot bright and cheery.

The portion of the park given to rest and re-

freshment pavilions, however, was left in darkness, cutting off a view of the park-like beauty of the Grove as a whole.

It lacked ten minutes of seven when Mr. Strapp came rushing into the entrance of the Airdrome. Pep looked frightened and Frank concerned, for they had never before seen their loyal friend and backer so angry. He whirled his cane and was red of face. He came to a halt, almost too choked to speak.

"Why, what is the matter, Mr. Strapp?" said Pep.

"The matter!" almost bellowed the exasperated Westerner. "Wish we'd never been hauled into this great big fizzle! Let me sit down somewhere and get my breath, or I'll explode."

Frank took the arm of the angry ranchman, led him into the enclosure and helped him to a chair near the entrance.

"Whew!" uttered Mr. Strapp, mopping his brow and sinking back exhausted. "I reckon I was never so excited in my life. It's a shame—a blazing shame!"

"Why, aren't things going all right?" queried Frank.

"Right! See here, Durham, out in my country they'd lynch that manager, Purtelle, and tar

and feather his assistant, Davis. I don't know what the owners of the Grove—I mean the big men behind it—are about, but there's a screw loose somewhere and it looks as if the whole proposition was going to tumble to pieces."

"Oh, surely not so bad as that," ventured Frank.

"All right, you'll see. Here that Purtelle hasn't made any arrangements at all about the boats that were to make special trips from the city. Down at the landing and where the electric and steam cars come in, there isn't a runner or guide. No band as they advertised; no big transparencies as they promised. Strangers arriving find a gloomy-looking post with a pointing hand botched across it marked: 'This Way to Riverside Grove.'

"Worst of all," went on Mr. Strapp, "the climb up the hill here has a spluttering ugly gasoline torch about every hundred feet. The people are left to find the Grove and blunder along as if they were going to some jail. Say, it's too bad! It means good-bye, to my way of thinking."

"Don't take such a gloomy view of things, Mr. Strapp," remarked Frank soothingly. "When we get the people in here we'll try to make up for these first night mistakes, that cannot be always helped."

"People! people!" almost shouted the wrathful Westerner. "I doubt if there'll be any people, I actually do. Mighty few of them, anyway. There'll be no crowd, for there's been no advertising. Those who arrive will be so dismal they'll go back home again. I know I would."

A decided dampener had been put on Pep's ardent anticipations. Jolly gave up his practicing on the piano to come forward and learn what was going on. He listened in silence until Mr. Strapp got through. Then he remarked philosophically:

"We'll just buckle down to our own especial work and do our duty—that's my spirit. Few or many, we'll make them think of the Airdrome a second time."

At that moment Randy came rushing in. Frank at a glance read disaster in his face. Where Mr. Strapp had been furious, Randy was stunned. He ran his hand over his face in a lost, desperate way, and sank into a seat.

"It's gone!" he gasped.

"What is gone?" demanded Pep, growing angry at all the evil tidings the hour was bringing in.

"The show. They've botched everything, Frank. Riverside Grove is a frost!"

## CHAPTER XVI

### AN EXCITING EVENING

"YES, it's a frost," repeated Randy, catching his breath and waving his hand—"a dead frost!"

"I'm sorry to hear you say so," observed Frank, quite steadily, but none the less affected by this confirmation of the pessimistic opinion of Mr. Strapp.

"What have you found out?" demanded the Westerner, in a tone of voice not at all usual with him.

"Lots," retorted Randy, "and all bad enough, I tell you. Say, Frank, what do you think they are doing at the gates?"

"You'll have to tell me, Randy," replied Frank. "I can't guess."

"They're charging admission, that's what they're doing."

"What!" shouted Mr. Strapp, leaping to his feet and seizing his cane. "Durham, there's going to be a row, and I'm going to start it!"

"Oh, now, that's a shame!" joined in Pep, adding to the confusion of the scene.

"A shame?" repeated the Westerner, waving his walking stick as if he wanted to hit somebody—"it's a fraud, a swindle! It was distinctly understood that admission was to be free, except on special occasions. I'd never have consented to come here otherwise. Why, that was the essence of the whole proposition—a free outing spot for families and others. It's the only way to give the shows a chance. What are we splitting up returns with the Grove people for, except to carry out the idea of drawing the crowds on that basis? Well," continued the ranchman, quieting down a bit—"they're charging for admission, what then?"

"Why, slim business and a disgusted crowd," replied Randy. "If I saw one, I saw a dozen people turn away and go straight back to the city. One man, a farmer, had come with his whole family. They assessed him ten cents a head and made him pay twenty-five cents for the rig."

"Isn't that fine, now!" jibed Pep. "Oh, they're a fine bunch, those managers!"

"I'm going to see about this violation of our contract," announced Mr. Strapp, with a determined look on his face. "And I'm going to

see about it right away. The way things have been turned awry is bad enough, but charging admittance knocks the whole scheme into a cocked hat."

"I wouldn't do anything rash, if I were you, Mr. Strapp," advised Frank.

"That's all right, Durham," responded the Westerner. "I suppose, though, you don't see that there's going to be a small riot here as soon as this news gets about. Why, the people having the concessions simply won't stand it."

"What are we going to do, Frank?" asked Randy, in a dolorous tone.

"Get ready for the crowds, of course," replied Frank, briskly, consulting his watch. "Get into the ticket booth, Randy, put on your best smile and go at things as if this was a hundred-dollar night."

"It's too bad," mourned Pep. "It isn't because things haven't panned out right, but there's sense in what Mr. Strapp says. I wouldn't wonder if the papers called the whole business a big swindle."

"You get your usher's uniform on and show the crowd in, Pep," directed Frank. "Mr. Jolly, I hope you've got an attractive musical programme."

Pep jumped to obey orders and Jolly went to



the piano, but neither could conceal their discouragement. Frank entered the sheet iron booth. Everything was at hand and ready, the light current had been tested, the films were ready to be run. Frank felt a little gloomy, but as Jolly struck up a gay tune he tried to cheer himself by humming the refrain.

It was a quarter of an hour before there was any stir about the place. Then four people came in. There was a lapse, and the first comers began to look around in a lonely fashion. By ones and twos about a dozen straggled in. Frank held his teeth tightly shut and touched the buzzer.

By the time the overture was concluded there were nearly fifty in the audience. Frank gave Pep the signal and the gas lights were turned down.

Frank had been too much engrossed in running the films to take a peep out of the booth. The first film was a comic skit and as it ended a murmur of approbation went the rounds.

"Why, this isn't so bad," soliloquized Frank, as he took a look at the audience. During the showing of the first film its numbers had increased to over a hundred and fifty. He stepped to the door of the booth as he heard a quick step and there stood Mr. Strapp. He looked a little wilted from the excitement and anxiety of

the night, but there was more steadiness in his manner than earlier in the evening.

"How is it?" inquired Frank, and he could not entirely conceal his eagerness. "We're having a fair audience—there must be some crowds arrived."

"I should judge that nearly half of them turned away when they found there was an admission fee," replied the Westerner. "I don't want to discuss that at this moment, Durham. There's a storm brewing for the management, as they will find out to-morrow. What I wanted to say just now is, I intend to make a speech."

"A speech?" queried Frank, wondering what new idea their erratic friend was about to exploit.

"That's it," replied Mr. Strapp. "I've sent Pep to tell Jolly about it, and you hold back the next picture till I get a chance to get up on the stage."

"All right, Mr. Strapp," assented Frank.

As soon as Jolly had finished the piece he was playing, Mr. Strapp walked forward. He went up the side steps leading to the stage and faced the audience, which began to wonder what was coming. The hardy ranchman had the bronzed face and free swing of a typical Westerner, and

not a few in the crowd fancied that he was a feature on the programme.

"Ladies and gentlemen," began the speaker, "I come from a square country where they raise square men. You people have come to Riverside Grove in good faith to find some bad hitches along the line. They can't always be helped, and the next time you come everything will be as smooth as velvet.

"There's been some error in making you pay at the gate, so as you pass out of the Airdrome you will please stop and receive your dimes, to make up for the admission price you didn't expect to have to pay. Don't forget us, good people, and tell your friends about us. There will be double films at this entertainment to sort of make up for things, and we hope you'll all go away happy."

Frank listened to the little speech of his good friend in some surprise, but was greatly pleased at its effect upon the audience. The blunt words were followed by a hum of general satisfaction. The old ranchman had certainly warmed up the audience. Frank notified Randy in the ticket booth of the arrangement to return their patrons the admission fee, and the entertainment proceeded.

A good many more people drifted into the

Airdrome during the evening. At no time, however, was the house half filled. Those who came went away more than satisfied, so far as the Airdrome was concerned.

"We've made a good impression, that's sure," said Randy, as the Airdrome closed down after two runs of the reels.

"Now then, we're free for some real excitement," announced Pep. "Come on, Frank; maybe there'll be a riot."

Frank had been attending so closely to his duties he had heard nothing more of the condition of affairs with the management and the exhibitors generally. Mr. Strapp had gone off by himself, but Jolly, who had spoken with him during the evening, was able to tell Frank that the Westerner had gone through a pretty stormy time, when he tackled the management about their bad break on opening night.

"He came near cleaning out the whole roost, as he put it," narrated the piano player. "Waded right into Davis, the assistant manager. Mr. Strapp says that Davis was scared almost to death. A lot of the exhibitors fairly stormed the office. They threatened all kinds of things and smashed in a glass door and upset a desk. It got so bad that Mr. Strapp had to change his

tactics and actually turn about and protect Davis."

As Frank and the others strolled about the grounds they were not at all cheered by what they saw and heard. The attendance, it seemed, was not one-tenth of what had been expected. Those who had come left early. The crowds had begun to disperse long since.

There was not a booth they passed where angry or dejected faces were not to be seen. Near the big dancing pavilion a little knot of concession men were gathered about an excited man. He was leading an indignation meeting and Frank discerned an ugly disposition on the part of his auditors.

Mr. Strapp came back to the Airdrome a few minutes after the others had returned.

"I've been looking over things, friends," he announced, "and I can't say they promise much encouragement. Davis says he acted on orders and was directed to charge the admission fee by Purtelle by wire from the city. He has promised to have Purtelle and the owners of Riverside Grove here the first thing in the morning. But that's only holding the crowd under control for the time being. Tell you, though, if there's any disappointment in what he promises, you'll

see one of the finest rows here to-morrow you ever set your eyes on."

"Say," broke in Pep, "aren't you all tired out—and hungry?"

"H'm! come to think of it," observed Mr. Strapp, "a bite to eat would sort of freshen a fellow up."

"Yes, but none of the restaurants is open now," objected Randy.

"Restaurants!" scoffed Pep. "What's the matter with the Cafe de la Airdrome, right here on the spot? What do you people say to a good, square meal of ham—and eggs?"

## CHAPTER XVII

### THE MOB

"HAM!" repeated Randy, hungrily, starting up like a famished boy at dinner call.

"And eggs," added Pep smartly, "just as I said. Particularly eggs—no cold storage specimens, but the real fruit fresh from the Dabb farm."

"You don't mean to say Mr. Dabb was here at the show?" inquired Randy.

"He was. I guess his hired man bought the family tickets at the window, so you didn't happen to see his suite. There were fourteen in the party. I gave him passes, but he refused to use them. If you find one dollar forty surplus in your cash, Randy, that accounts for Mr. Dabb refusing to take back his money."

"Oh, lots of people did that," asserted Randy. "I heard half a dozen say the double show was alone worth coming down to the Grove to see."

"That's encouraging," said Frank. "Come,

friends, there's nothing to be gloomy about in that. This situation is going to be mended some way."

"You bet it is," declared Mr. Strapp, energetically. "I'm going to have it out with the management to-morrow if I have to break my way into that private den of theirs, and if it takes all day to do it."

"Well, let us forget all about it for to-night, and adjourn to our living quarters, suggested Ben Jolly, amiably. "About those eggs, Pep—"

"Why, Mr Dabb told me I would find a basket with six dozen of them outside our kitchen door. I just went around to take a peep. They're there."

The incident relieved the depressing tone of the evening. Pep marshaled his willing guests into the big room at the rear of the Airdrome, lit the gas, put on a cook's apron and brandished a frying pan valorously.

"Step up now, gentlemen," he directed. "Eggs—fresh eggs, farm eggs. How will you have them? To your taste—boiled, fried or poached. Give your orders."

"Frying is easiest, I reckon," observed Mr. Strapp, "and with a bite of ham—"

"There's two loaves of bread—and coffee," advised Pep. "Here, Randy, you set the table."



The rattle of knives and forks and the tempting aroma of frizzling ham made pleasing music for the tired group after the strain of the day. It was quite a festal occasion, and comfortable sleeping arrangements were then arranged for all hands.

"You'd better get up," the lively Pep aroused his friends by calling out at seven o'clock the next morning. "Breakfast is ready, and I hear something is doing at the gate."

"What do you mean by 'something doing,' Pep?" asked Randy, tumbling out of his cot.

"Mr. Artingstall just went by. He says there's quite a crowd about the office already. You know he is very popular with a lot of the people who showed here last year. He is trying to induce the mob to act reasonably and says he'll be here again about eight o'clock. He wants Mr. Strapp to go down to headquarters with him."

"I'll be ready," avowed the sturdy Westerner, looking determined. "Pep, you're a famous provider, I will say," he added, as he glanced at gas stove and table.

"Oh, I keep provisioned up, being the official commissary," replied Pep, with a touch of pride. "I've been practicing on pancakes three morn-

ings and I think you'll find them piping hot and good."

They were so good, indeed, that Pep had to return to the griddle twice for a new batch. Jolly had just finished the last flapjack with an approving smack of the lips, when a series of yells on the street in front brought all hands to their feet.

Frank made a dash through the enclosure, the others following. As they opened the main gate a stirring spectacle met their view.

About fifty men were grouped in the middle of the street. Their leader, the man who ran the merry-go-round, was brandishing a big club. Others had stones and bricks in their hands.

About a dozen others were rushing around either side of the enclosure as if in pursuit of somebody. Frank ran up to the leader of the mob.

"What's the trouble, Mr. Jones?" he inquired, addressing the merry-go-round man, whom he knew.

"Matter?" shouted that individual. "A riot! It's that Purtelle we're after. He comes here bold as brass with his smooth talk, just as if he was a benefactor of the human race."

"Yes, and say," put in the proprietor of the dancing pavilion, "we made just one rush for

him. He heard our roar and bolted through an open window."

"He ran this way," spoke the leader of the crowd. "Search for him, men. He's in hiding somewhere around the Airdrome."

"He couldn't get inside," explained Frank. "Where did you see him last?"

"Dodging past the entrance—hi! there he is now!"

The mob made a rush for the side of the enclosure, carrying Frank and his friends with them. Sure enough, the fox had been unearthed. Purtelle must have been hiding among some loose lumber at the rear of the Airdrome, for he came from that direction.

The manager of Riverside Grove looked to be a very badly scared man. A dozen of his infuriated victims were at his heels. He saw the crowd approaching from the street and veered to escape them—no use.

Swat! A swift speeding oval-shaped object cut the air from the midst of his pursuers. It struck his silk hat, splattered it white and yellow and sent it rolling into the mud.

Swat—swat!—another of the mysterious projectiles caught him in the middle of his back and there was a new decoration. Purtelle uttered a

wild shriek as a third well-directed missile landed on his neck.

Then followed a volley. A perfect hail of the missiles caught the fugitive about arms, limbs and body. He turned to measure the distance between himself and his pursuers and received two projectiles squarely in the face, missed his footing and fell headlong with a despairing yell where a wire had tripped him.

"The mischief!" ejaculated the amazed Pep—"my eggs!"

"Sure as you live!" shouted Randy. "The crowd must have run across them and—"

"Stop!" thundered a stentorian voice. "Back, men. There's a right way to do things, and I'm going to see the programme carried out."

Mr. Strapp had run to the side of the prostrate manager. He picked up a heavy stake, rolled back one sleeve and, grim and resolute, faced the onrushing mob.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### A HARD FIGHT

THE crowd surged backward as Hank Strapp waved the wooden stake in a way that showed that he was in deadly earnest. Jolly, Frank, Randy and Pep lined up beside him.

The mob was in no gentle humor, the man who owned the dancing pavilion being especially vicious.

"Come on!" he yelled to the crowd, "don't let one man keep you from giving that swindler his just deserts!"

"Wait a minute, friends," spoke a new voice, and Frank felt relieved as the former manager of the Grove, Mr. Artingstall, came hurrying to the scene of conflict. He placed his hand on the stalwart arm of the Westerner. "This is a square man," he continued. "He's got as much interest at stake in the Grove as any man here, and I advise you to listen to him."

The popularity of the old manager carried the

day. The uproar of voices died down to a low grumble and there were no cudgels raised nor missiles thrown. The group cast angry looks at the wretched man whom Mr. Strapp was defending. Then they waited to learn what his protector had to say.

"I tell you, my friends," spoke Mr. Strapp, "this kind of a ruction might do out West where I came from, but it don't pass hereabouts. I suggest that you give Mr. Purtelle a show to explain how things stand, and why."

"Not here, not now—in this horrible fix!" whimpered the panic-stricken manager.

Purtelle certainly presented a striking spectacle. His glossy silk hat was gone, his stylish attire bedaubed and dripping, his face discolored, his eyes full of terror. He had arisen to his feet, skulking behind Mr. Strapp and the others like the craven he was.

"All right," said Strapp. "You go to the office as fast as you can and get yourself in trim to say something definite to the crowd. I tell you, my man, they're in a dangerous mood. Don't try any fooling with them, for they simply won't stand it. Have you really sent for the men behind this proposition, or is that another bluff?"

"They'll be here inside of an hour," declared Purtelle.

"All right, we will be on hand to interview 'em," announced the Westerner. "Gentlemen," he called out to the crowd, "if you will move towards that pile of lumber yonder we'll form a sort of grievance committee in the regular way, and see how we can straighten things out."

The crowd knew very well that this was a ruse to give the manager a chance to get free of them and back to the office of the grounds, but they did not care. Now that their anger had cooled down somewhat, they realized, too, that Purtelle had received a pretty good dose of punishment. Then the practical way in which the Westerner talked and acted encouraged them to feel that he meant business and would make a good leader in their battle for their rights.

A miserable figure the manager made as he slunk away, glancing fearfully over his shoulder at his enemies. There was silence and only grim looks now. Purtelle was allowed to go his way unmolested.

"I say, Mr. Artingstall," said Mr. Strapp, "we want to get some kind of head and tail to this business—sort of an organization, I should say. Just climb up on top of that pile of lumber and act as chairman, won't you?"

"I hardly think I ought to do that," returned Mr. Artingstall. "You see, it might look as if I was trying to down the new manager out of spite. I'll suggest your name, as I can see that the crowd has taken to you. Besides that, your investment here is as big as that of any of them, and you have the right to have some say."

Mr. Strapp had considerable to say after he had been unanimously elected chairman of the meeting. He was full of fight and that pleased the crowd. He talked sense, was for prompt action and when he named a committee to represent the concession men, they were elected by acclamation.

It was settled that "Chairman" Strapp, the merry-go-round proprietor, the man who owned the dancing pavilion and Frank Durham should constitute the committee to go before the owners of the Grove.

"I want Durham because he's my partner, smart as a whip and a sort of a balance wheel for me if I get riled," explained the Westerner in his quaint way. "Now then, gentlemen," he added to the crowd, "no uproar when we go down to the office. We've got rights and I'm going to demand them."

"Bounce that manager, Purtelle—that's got to be done!" yelled several voices.



"I don't think he'll want to stay after what you've done to him," observed Mr. Strapp, with a grim smile.

"Say," spoke up Pep Smith, jumping upon the impromptu platform, "who's going to pay me for those eggs?"

This raised a hearty laugh and put the crowd in good humor. They quietly followed Mr. Strapp and the others in the direction of the office building and dispersed about it as the committee entered.

Those connected directly with the office were huddled in one corner. Davis, the assistant manager, recognized the visitors and came towards them. He was rather shaky and looked like a man in a decidedly unpleasant situation.

"Have any of the directors of the amusement company arrived?" inquired Mr. Strapp.

"Yes, sir, they are in the room yonder," replied Davis, pointing to a closed door.

"Very well, the concession people have appointed us a committee to lay our case before them," explained the Westerner, "and I wish you would announce us."

"Yes, sir," said Davis, with alacrity, "I'll do it at once."

He came out of the inner room in a few minutes, and, holding the door open, ushered in Mr.

Strapp and his companions. Then he closed the door after them and hurriedly went to another part of the building. Three prosperous-looking gentlemen confronted the visitors. They seemed uneasy and worried.

"I suppose you have come to see about the management here?" spoke one.

"You mean the mismanagement," corrected Mr. Strapp. "Yes, sir, we're on hand to wind up affairs or let them go to smash, just as you decide."

"We have sent for Mr. Purtelle," replied the first speaker. "Ah, here he is now," but as the door opened it was to admit instead of Purtelle the assistant manager, Davis.

"Mr. Purtelle has gone," the latter announced, in a flustered way. "He says he will send in his resignation as soon as he gets to the city."

"Hold on, that won't do," spoke the chief director of the company. "Stop him; get him. He hasn't reported on some stock sales and he owes the company a lot of money."

"He's gone, sir, in his machine," reported Davis. "Borrowed a coat and hat and got out of the place as quick as he could."

The directors consulted among themselves. Then one went to the telephone. Frank, watching all these maneuvers, guessed that the directors

were anxious that their recent manager should not get far out of their reach.

The conference was resumed within a few minutes. Mr. Strapp was invited to state the case of those who held concessions. He did not spare the management. He told of the many broken promises, of the loss to the exhibitors, of the sure basis for damage suits.

The directors hemmed and hawed, but were compelled to see the justice of the claims put forward. Their avarice, however, prompted a bitter fight on the question of gate admission.

"See here now," spoke the chief director, after Mr. Strapp had denounced this feature, "we've spent a lot of money and we've got to spend a lot more getting things going. Ten cents admission is a mere trifle."

"Yes, but it's our dime you're taking!" cried the merry-go-round man. "There's lots of people that your dime will keep from seeing the shows."

"You might just as well shut up shop as to think of charging an admission fee to the Grove," declared Mr. Strapp, tartly. "It's a point we shall fight to the last ditch."

"Well, we may be willing to reduce the charge to a nominal price, say a nickel," said the chief director.

"No, sir," proclaimed the Westerner staunchly, pounding the table with his fist. "You advertised free admission and it's got to be that."

"Suppose we hold our ground and do not submit to your demands?" inquired another of the directors, a shrewd old man with a ferret face.

"Wait and see!" answered Mr. Strapp.

"I would like to make a suggestion, if you please," spoke up Frank, as an idea came to his mind.

The directors stared at him, as if to frown down the temerity of a mere lad.

"That's all right," asserted the Westerner. "Durham is one of my business partners and a member of this committee."

"I would like to say," said Frank, "that if the management persists in charging an admission fee, there is nothing in our contract to prevent us from letting the people into the Airdrome free."

"Huh!" ejaculated the chief director, seeing a light.

"As the management depend on a share of our returns for their principal income," continued Frank, quietly, "perhaps a thought of what such a move might mean will influence them to change their minds."

"You struck them all of a heap, Durham!"

chuckled Mr. Strapp gleefully, as ten minutes later they came out to report to the waiting exhibitors. "You touched their pocketbooks and it brought them to time."

"What news?" demanded Pep, rushing up to the committee.

"Everything granted," reported Mr. Strapp.

A cheer went up from those who heard.

"And what's better," shouted out the merry-go-round man, "they've taken back the old manager, Mr. Artingstall!"

## CHAPTER XIX

### THE ORIENTAL PAGODA

“OH, fellows, come—come quick—the sight of your life!”

Thus exclaimed Pep Smith, bursting in upon Frank and Randy, busy in the ticket booth of the Airdrome figuring up the receipts of the night before.

Seventy-two hours had made a wonderful change in conditions in and about Riverside Grove. Mr. Strapp and his helpers had brought about an almost magical change. New promises had been made by the directors and Mr. Artingstall was the man to make them keep them. The second day of the opening a new army of workmen hurried the unfinished work to completion, all the city papers announced free admission, the arrangements with a line of excursion boats were made and an encouraging crowd was the result.

Everybody was satisfied but Slavin. He had refused to take any part in the effort to right

affairs, had scowled, grumbled and threatened, and, Frank had heard, was about to bring a damage suit against the owners of the enterprise.

The evening before the revolving sign on top of the entrance canopy of the Airdrome had burst forth in all its glory. From the gate it was the most noticeable object on the grounds.

The motion picture chums learned that the Columbia had not done much business. There were two reasons for this. The first was that any person looking for a motion picture show would naturally select the Airdrome as the nearer and more attractive looking. The outdoor element was fetching, whereas the Columbia was a stuffy, old-fashioned hall and could be reached only by going up a stairway. The second reason was that the Columbia was located in the midst of a great many minor attractions, some as low as a nickel, and by the time a person was ready to sit down for an hour's rest, he had either spent his money, or had a varied scene to survey from a comfortable seat in some open refreshment pavilion.

All those at the Airdrome felt the cheering effects of good business and the promise of still better. Free admission to the Grove brought a great many people from surrounding villages, even from some having local photo playhouses. When Pep rushed in with the sensational an-

nouncement that begins this chapter, Frank and Randy were just congratulating themselves on a paying evening the night previous.

"What is it, Pep?" inquired Randy, quickly. He saw that the safe was locked, and he and Frank came out of the ticket booth in short order.

"It's Mr. Strapp," explained Pep, "and he's helping some workmen carry an oriental pagoda down the road.

"Nonsense!" commented Randy. "One of your dreams; or are you playing some joke on us—thunder!"

Randy paused abruptly, agape. Pep's face was lit up with excitement, and Frank stared with curiosity at the picture presented not fifty feet away.

Sure enough, there was Mr. Strapp, and there, too, was the oriental pagoda. The sturdy Westerner was in his shirt sleeves. His hat was thrust back on his head and he was puffing and perspiring profusely. With one hand he was steadying a gilded, gaudily-painted structure upon a broad hand truck, which was being pulled along by two workmen belonging to the grounds.

The ex-ranchman was so engrossed in his labors that he did not notice the boys until they had filed along by his side, and Pep, overflowing with animation, challenged him with query:



"For goodness sake, Mr. Strapp, what have you got there?"

"Have you gone into the moving picture business?" added Randy.

The two men pulling the cart came to a halt, glad of the excuse afforded to take a little rest. Mr. Strapp mopped his dripping brow, and turned to his young friends, his face a broad grin.

"Sort of staggers you, doesn't it?" he chuckled. "New investment. I paid only eleven dollars for that pagoda. It's oriental, too, they tell me, whatever that means. What do you think of it?"

"But what in the world are you going to do with it?" asked Randy.

"You follow me and find out," laughed the Westerner. "I struck it quite by accident and bought it at a bargain. It was used as a ticket office at a Wild West show here last year. I found it tipped over on its side in the mud, windows broken and doors off their hinges, but all that can soon be mended. Hoist away, there, men. I want to get this job done, the grime off my hands and about half a dozen cool lemonades into me."

Ben Jolly came upon the scene as the cart resumed its progress. Such rare good nature

shone in the satisfied face of Mr. Strapp that the trailing group were encouraged to "josh" him.

"I'll bet he's going to start a soda and candy stand all by himself!" railed Randy.

"No, that isn't it," broke in Pep, "he's going to dress up as an Egyptian seer and tell fortunes, two for fifteen cents! Don't you see it would carry out the oriental idea?"

"I think Mr. Strapp is going to give up New York and turn the pagoda into a bungalow," submitted Jolly.

"That's all right!" shouted the good-natured Westerner, "rail, rant and guess. Durham discovered the Belgian hare house. Give me credit for this pagoda. It's a business idea, and don't you forget it."

The speaker seemed to know just where he was going, for the truck did not stop again until it had arrived about forty feet from the big gateway. Here a broad asphalted space split off into paths and roads leading in several directions. There was a triangular grass plat here about twenty feet broad at its widest part. The pagoda was dumped off the cart and carried to the edge of this. It was a spot passed by every visitor as he entered the grounds.

"Whew! that was some work for an old man

who knows more about lassoing cattle than he does of oriental pagodas," observed Mr. Strapp. "You men see your boss about the rest of the work, and tell him to spare no expense. Here, get yourselves a soda," and the generous-hearted Westerner handed each half a dollar. "Now then, you shiftless fellows who haven't anything to do but follow a real business man around, get me to the nearest refreshment stand and I'll treat the crowd and explain about that pagoda."

Sodas were always acceptable to the boys, but Pep forgot to enjoy his soda as fully as usual, devoured as he was with curiosity as to the plans of Mr. Strapp. The latter was provokingly slow and leisurely. He sipped his soda calmly, and ordered a second glass. Then he said quietly:

"I suppose you remember that we agreed to look out for those Burns youngsters we left behind us in New York City?"

"Yes," nodded Frank. "They are all right, I hope, Mr. Strapp. Hal Vincent agreed to see that nothing happened to them."

"Oh, they're more than all right," chuckled the Westerner, "for I sent word to them to-day, and they'll be here in full trim in the morning."

"Why, what do you mean?" inquired Pep.

"Well," replied Mr. Strapp, "I'll be glad to

have those deserving little folks directly under my eye. That pagoda is going to be fitted up the finest paint and gilt will make it, and Benny and Ruth are going to run it as their new flower stand."

## CHAPTER XX

### SMOOTH SAILING

It was a gala day at Riverside Grove and the Airdrome was packed to suffocation, yet there were tears in the eyes of Hank Strapp. He stood, Pep by his side, glancing over the great crowd. This comprised a busy, babbling throng, mostly children, delightedly discussing the film just ended.

"It does my old heart good to see 'em, Pep," declared the Westerner. "Who would think that a little cheap pleasure like that could bring so much happiness? Durham has some splendid ideas, but this is the most satisfactory of all of them."

Everything had been in fine running order for over a week now at the Grove. It was Saturday and the Airdrome had advertised it in their modest way as Children's Day. This publicity had been confined mainly to the immediate neigh-

borhood of the Grove, including surrounding towns. About two miles away, located on the river, was an orphan asylum and its inmates had been invited to attend the Airdrome free of charge.

It had done Frank's heart good to see the two hundred or more children from the orphanage file past the gates when the latter were thrown open at noon that day. A good many of the side shows, the proprietors liking the Airdrome people, and influenced by the leadership of Mr. Strapp, were also thrown open to the children and the little ones had plenty of fun all the afternoon.

"Yes," observed Pep, "it's not only a fine advertisement for the Airdrome, but it makes a fellow feel good to see those children take in those funny films."

The last one ended twenty minutes later and the audience began to file out, for there was an hour's intermission before the regular evening entertainment began. Mr. Strapp had advised the asylum teachers to hold back their charges till the house was emptied. Then in marched the man who ran the big refreshment pavilion under the Columbia, with an assistant carrying half a dozen crates. Frank and the others each took one of these.

"Cones, children," announced Mr. Strapp in his jovial way, "one vanilla ice cream cone and one strawberry for each. Here you are, and we'll have a tune on the piano while you are eating them."

Ben Jolly struck off into a lively medley and eager little hands were filled with the coveted refreshment. The orphan boys gave a ringing cheer when it was all over and the little misses courtesied and smiled their prettiest. One small tot, to whom Frank evidently had been pointed out as the operator, came up to him lisping:

"You make the pretty pictures?" and as Frank assented the tiny miss climbed up on a chair, tip-toed towards him, clasped her arms about his neck and kissed him first on one cheek and then on the other.

"I declare!" said Mr. Strapp, as the place was emptied after that, "it's actually lonesome with that happy crowd gone. I've never enjoyed anything more in my life."

"There's going to be some hustling to-night, I'm thinking," remarked Pep.

"Yes, there have been more daytime people on the grounds here this afternoon than at any time since the Grove opened," agreed Frank.

"Every Saturday will be better, I reckon," predicted Mr. Strapp, "the more the Grove is

advertised. I count on a record evening. The weather is superb and Saturday night always means a big harvest."

"By the way," put in Jolly, "did you notice what the Columbia people are doing?"

"No, what is it?" inquired Pep.

"They've put up four big signs near the entrance, reading: 'Watch the Columbia!'"

"They need watching, that crowd!" observed Pep. "I hear that one man lost his pocketbook and another his watch there last evening."

"I strolled up to the Columbia just before we opened here to-day, to see if I could discover anything remarkable," observed Jolly.

"And did you?" queried Frank.

"For a fact, yes. The sign means something. Slavin has got busy. What you think they have rigged up on the roof?"

"Band stand, I suppose."

"No, sir," replied the piano player—"a searchlight."

"Well, that isn't so bad," said Frank. "They are on the highest point of ground in the Grove. Not a poor idea, indicating a blazing center. We had better get something to eat, for we will have to begin the entertainment in less than an hour."

The motion picture chums were not far off in their calculations when they anticipated a busy



evening. It was barely dusk when they started up the illuminated revolving sign, and in less than ten minutes their share of the crowd in the Grove began to move their way.

"Say, Frank," spoke Pep, interrupting his ushering duties by sticking his head inside the operating booth, "get out front and take a look while you've got the chance."

"For what?" questioned Frank.

"The searchlight up at the Columbia—it's really worth looking at."

Frank had everything ready and five minutes to spare before the first film was due. He left the booth and went out into the road beyond the Airdrome entrance. Ben Jolly also, apprised by Pep, joined him a moment later.

"Well, that's some advertising, I must say," remarked the piano player.

"It's fine for all hands, for it must show from the river and the town," commented Frank.

"Yes, but Slavin doesn't seem to be thinking of the general good, the way he's working the light."

The searchlight was certainly an attractive equipment of the Grove. It was a fine instrument, far-reaching in its focus, and its glow sweeping the sky and passing over the many pretty booths and pavilions of the Grove was pleasing. As

Jolly had said, however, Slavin was operating for himself solely. The focus was fixed so that it illuminated the space about the gates brightly. It blazed dazzlingly upon the crowds. Then it was so manipulated that it receded slowly as if guiding them, lighting their pathway, leading them straight to the vicinity of the Columbia. Then the operation would be repeated, calling attention to one continuous streak of radiance ending at the same central point in the grounds.

"It's quite a clever stunt," commented Frank, "and the Columbia is located just right to try it out."

"They want to have a good show to hold the people when they get them," added Jolly, "and I hear they have not been very strong along that line."

They returned inside the Airdrome to resume their respective duties. Before he went back into the operating booth, however, Frank was gratified to observe the people flocking down the broad roadway, and he noted, too, that nearly every seat in the house was occupied.

"Riverside Grove has caught the popular favor," he reflected, "and the Airdrome is certainly getting its share of the business."

The hum of enterprise and prosperity pervaded the grounds, and inside the Airdrome cheerfulness

and satisfaction prevailed. It looked as if the new enterprise of the motion picture chums had come into smooth waters at last.

Jolly had just ended the overture at the piano. Pep had put up the "full house" bar across the entrance, the auditorium lights were turned out and Frank had started the first film, when he caught the echo of what seemed to be an expression of general dismay from the audience. He did not stop the machine, but applied his eye to the little spy hole at his side. An amazing sight greeted Frank Durham.

## CHAPTER XXI

### THE SEARCHLIGHT

"FRANK! Frank!" sounded the voice of Pep, the youth hammering at the iron booth, "shut off the picture and open."

Frank reached over and unset the inside snap lock, but he let the film continue to reel out. He knew that Pep was excitable and of poor judgment in an emergency. There was nothing so far to indicate alarm on the part of the audience. Jolly was still playing on the piano. Frank did not intend doing anything until he knew the real conditions.

"No use doing that," declared Pep, as the door opened and he crowded in beside Frank.

"Why not, Pep—what is that light?"

"Because the audience can't see the screen for the flare, and the flare is that scoundrel Slavin's searchlight! Haven't you guessed it already?"

"I had not," replied Frank, sticking his head beyond the half open door. "I see it now, though."

The enclosure was a great glow—a nest of vivid light. Tracing its source, the high point of ground occupied by the Columbia showed the searchlight on its roof directed straight down into the auditorium of the Airdrome.

“Perhaps it’s an accident,” suggested Frank, slow to attribute such meanness even to the proprietor of the Columbia, who had always acted as if he considered the Airdrome people his enemies.

“Oh, yes!” cried Pep—“that looks like it, doesn’t it, now!”

The operator of the distant searchlight was in a position to throw the glare straight down into the Airdrome’s roofless enclosure. Some skilled hand so manipulated the light that it moved along the entire length of the Airdrome. This not only blinded those in whose faces it shone, but caused the picture thrown on the screen to fade, flicker and become distorted.

“Durham, this is simply atrocious!” shouted Mr. Strapp, bustling up to the booth.

“We seem completely at the mercy of those Columbia people, Mr. Strapp,” replied Frank. “For to-night only, though—I’ll promise you that.”

“What are we going to do—the audience is getting restless.”

“Turn on the lights, Pep,” directed Frank.

"Then you and Mr. Strapp get some help outside and run the screens over the enclosure just as we do in the daytime. I'll try and fix things up inside here."

"It's a blazing shame! I'll—I'll see if that man, Slavin, can annoy people this way!" blustered the irate Westerner, but Frank had shut off the film and was hastening to the stage.

He lifted his hand to enforce silence among the audience, some of whom had already arisen to leave their seats. Then he said, clearly and steadily:

"The films will be resumed in a few minutes, ladies and gentlemen. We shall be obliged to cover the top of the auditorium, as a rival is seeking to break up our entertainment. Be patient with us and we will give a better show than ever, and we shall see to it that this annoyance does not disturb you again. Those who feel that we are not giving them the worth of their money are welcome to receive back their admission fee at the ticket office."

"Good for you!" called out an encouraging voice.

"Pretty mean treatment that rival is giving you!" shouted a big farmer. "We'll blacklist him for this!"

"Take your time," said the leader of a party of

students—"you're the right sort of people, we can see that."

It took less than five minutes to slide the overhead coverings into place. The trick of the proprietor of the Columbia was entirely patent now, for the searchlight never moved. The heavily tarred sections of roof canvas that shut out the sunlight in the daytime, however, proved just as sure a screen from the searchlight.

The entertainment was resumed and everybody seemed satisfied. When the intermission came, a new crowd was ready to take the place of the departing throng, notwithstanding that word had gone around outside that the open air feature would be dispensed with for that evening.

"Now then, Durham," exclaimed Mr. Strapp, taking up his cane and grasping it firmly as the last visitor left the Airdrome, "you and I have got some business to attend to."

"I think I know what you are alluding to," replied Frank—"you intend to see Mr. Slavin."

"See him? See him? Smash him, if it's necessary!" declared the excitable Westerner. "Competition is one thing; low down trickery quite another. I'll find a way of stopping that fellow from interfering with us, if I have to devote all of my time to it. Come ahead."

Frank left the Airdrome with his friend, trying to curb the fiery temper of the Westerner.

"I understand that the Columbia is doing very little business," he remarked. "I heard, too, that Slavin is being bothered by some creditors."

"Not unlikely," rejoined Mr. Strapp, "but is it our fault that he doesn't know how to run a show?"

The Columbia was closed and dark when Mr. Strapp and Frank reached it. The refreshment booths below, however, were doing a rushing business, and at the dancing pavilions nearby crowds were waiting to get places on the platforms. Frank looked all about to see if he could catch a glimpse of Dave Sawyer. Daily he had kept an eye out for his mysterious young friend, but he had not caught sight of him. Pep believed he was either keeping out of their way purposely, or had left the Columbia entirely.

"There's our man," announced Mr. Strapp, brusquely, as he made out Slavin standing beside the building staring at the crowds with his habitual surly look. "Your name's Slavin, I believe?" continued the Westerner, approaching him.

"Yes," snapped Slavin, "what of it?"

"My name is Strapp—Hank Strapp from



Butte, Montana," resumed Frank's companion. "We run the Airdrome."

"What are you telling me that for?" snarled Slavin. "I know about it already. Huh! Not much of an open air show just now, eh?"

Frank seized the arm of his quick-tempered friend. So stinging were the words and so insolent the manner of the proprietor of the Columbia, that Frank feared there would be an immediate conflict.

"Well," continued Mr. Strapp, controlling himself, "I've come to tell you something. It's this: You're as mean as a prairie coyote and twice as uncivilized."

"That so?" jeered Slavin, blowing the smoke from his cigar in the direction of the speaker.

"It's so and I'll add a few words," said Mr. Strapp. "You're a dog in the manger, and it wouldn't take much after your sneaking trick of to-night to set the respectable showmen hereabouts on your trail and run you to the nearest creek for a good, sound dousing. You deserve it."

"Why don't you try it?" taunted the fellow.

"You annoy us with those searchlight tricks of yours another night," said Mr. Strapp, "and there will be something doing."

"All through?" sneered Slavin. "Let me

say my say, then. I'll do just as I like with my own property, and you can squirm. By rights I had the option on the place you got, and I'll get it yet; see if I don't."

"I would suggest, Mr. Slavin," observed Frank quietly, "that we can put up a screen that your searchlight cannot get past. Why should you put us to all this annoyance and expense?"

"Say," growled Slavin, turning upon Frank, "you're pretty young and fresh, you are. I'll say this to you: I make it a rule to get what I'm after, fair means or foul. It's a business principle with me."

"I should judge that," nodded Mr. Strapp sarcastically. "It doesn't seem to make you very happy—nor prosperous, from what I hear. Come on, Durham. This fellow isn't worth wasting time on. Take this to mind though, Slavin: You'll leave us alone after this, or you won't run a show long at Riverside Grove."

Frank almost shuddered as he took a last glance at the face of the proprietor of the Columbia. There was a secret menace in those bold, leering eyes.

"We are not through with that man yet, Mr. Strapp," he said.

## CHAPTER XXII

### AN EVENTFUL DAY

MR. ARTINGSTALL, the new manager of Riverside Grove, was informed next morning of the behavior of the Columbia's proprietor. None of the Airdrome people told him, however, for Frank and the others felt that they were able to fight their own battles. The news got around because various petty maneuvers of Slavin had incensed other business neighbors. He was the subject of general complaint.

"I've been trying to reason with Slavin about that searchlight, Mr. Durham," said the manager as he met Frank. "I've been trying to influence him, but he's a stubborn and selfish kind of individual. I don't know as we can stop him from doing what he pleases with that searchlight of his, but I'll protect you people from other annoyance, at any rate.

"We were thinking," returned Frank, "that if Mr. Slavin continues his tactics, we might set

up a wide canvas screen just behind the Airdrome. That would stop the light, of course."

"Just my idea," said the manager. "If you have to do it the Grove will stand the expense."

"Oh, we would share that," said Frank. "If we do set up the screen, we will use it as a big lettered advertisement of the Airdrome."

"Why, that is quite an idea," returned Mr. Artingstall with animation. "Set around with reflector lights it would show pretty nearly over the grounds."

It was not necessary for the screen to be built, however. Circumstances set at naught the vicious schemes of Slavin and relieved the Airdrome folks of any further annoyance. The second evening something proved to be the matter with the searchlight. The next night a light drizzle of rain set in just as the shows opened for the evening entertainment, and the roof covers had to be drawn. The third day about four o'clock in the afternoon Pep came rushing into the Airdrome in one of his usual spasms of excitement.

"Oh, say! Frank—Mr. Strapp—all of you—hustle if you want to see some fun!"

It had been a day of light attendance at the Grove on account of the threatening weather, and Frank had decided that it would not pay to give any daytime exhibition. The Columbia,

however, had opened up to catch what stray custom there was going and it was thither that Pep now led his friends.

A crowd was gathered in front of the place. The refreshment booths below were doing little or nothing, for their owners and help had joined the throng outside to take in what was going on.

A big wagon with a derrick manned by half a dozen laborers was drawn up at the side of the big, ornamental stairway that was the only means of entrance and exit for the hall upstairs. As previously told, this big staircase had been built independent of the main structure. This had been necessary because the lessee of the lower story had refused to allow any supports to be placed to obstruct his light. The staircase was a bulky construction, supported by immense iron chains suspended from large iron beams anchored to the roof. To this ladders now ran. The workmen had loosened the chains and the staircase had been lowered to the ground.

There was not a large audience upstairs, but what there was made up in noise and confusion for numbers. Heads were stuck out of every open window. Massed at the entrance where the staircase had been, was a gaping crowd, facing a void and with no means visible for reaching the ground. Several attaches of the Columbia

were guarding the spot, trying to quiet the patrons of the playhouse by stating that the staircase would soon be back in place.

The show had stopped and the imprisoned audience was thinking only of regaining *terra firma*. One venturesome individual had found a rope somewhere and was letting himself down from one of the windows.

His foolhardy feat was greeted with a yell of delight from the crowd below. Then as the rope proved too short and he landed in the middle of a fresh pop-corn cart, sending its contents in all directions, the humor of the throng burst out uproariously.

Pep got near as he could to a spot where Slavin was storming at the brawny superintendent of the workmen. The former's face was distorted with rage, he was using the most violent language and menacing the man with his clenched fists. Pep listened for a moment or two and then ran back to his friends.

"That Slavin is having a fine time of it," he reported.

"What do you think—they've seized that staircase for debt."

"Is that so, now?" queried Jolly. "They picked a bad time to seize it, seems to me."

"Yes, a bad time for those scared people up

there," said Pep. "A good time to scare Slavin into paying the bill, though. He counted on the staircase belonging to the building once it was set in place, so he could defy his creditors from taking it away and put off paying as long as he liked. The law says different, though, it appears, as the staircase is just like an awning, and those men are going to drag it away."

This, however, was not done. The crowd saw Slavin dart away, and work on the removal of the staircase was suspended. In about half an hour Slavin came running back. In some way he had raised enough money to pay off his creditor. The staircase was set back in place and the audience came down it in haste. They looked like people who would scarcely venture back into "that old fire-trap of a place," as one of their number called it.

"I wouldn't wonder if that searchlight went next," observed Randy.

"Well, one thing sure," said Frank, "Mr. Slavin's business principles, as he calls them, do not seem to bring him an easy or a prosperous time. Hello, Pep is off again at a tangent! What is it this time, I wonder?"

They were walking back in the direction of the Airdrome. Pep had made one of his sensational dashes. Without a word he had run down the

middle of the broad roadway in pursuit of an automobile that had just whizzed past them.

The machine contained a flashily dressed young fellow and three merry, well dressed young ladies. It seemed to be a party out for a good time. Pep kept after the auto like a crack sprinter. He got near enough to touch it, and seemed about to catch at the hood and cling to it when the machine stopped.

Frank and the others walked a little faster, to come up to the spot in front of a large refreshment booth where it had halted. The young ladies got out and went into the pavilion. The driver of the auto shut off the power and passed around the machine to see that everything was all right. He came upon Pep and halted, staring at him.

Pep stood about six feet behind the automobile. He had struck a pose, had taken from his pocket a card and a pencil and was industriously writing. He would look at the number on the back of the vehicle, then his pencil would move. To Frank, watching him closely as he approached with the others, Pep's intense application concealed some purpose not outwardly apparent.

"Hello, there—what are you doing?" asked the automobilist.

"Taking the number of your license tag,"



replied Pep coolly, and he again glanced at the back of the auto and then penciled some numbers, although he had been thus employed long enough to have written down the numbers half a dozen times.

"Taking my number?" scowled the young man angrily—"who told you to make that your business?"

"Why, you were in too much of a hurry to let me get it about three weeks ago when you smashed a flower stand on upper Broadway," explained Pep. "I've got it now, though. Thank you, just the same."

"Hold on, there," ordered the man, as Pep made a feint to move away, and flushing up as if Pep's reminder was a clear one. "What have you got to do with what you are talking about?"

"Why, only this," answered Pep, "you broke up the business of two little friends of mine. I'm the fellow who chased you and I knew I would run across you some day. All I wanted was the number of your license."

"What about it?" pressed the man.

"Well, you violated the law back there in the city and you did some damage that you didn't stop to pay for. If you knew how hard it has been for the two little flower sellers you ran into, you'd do something for them, if you're anything

of a man. They're right here on the grounds, too," continued Pep. "Come and fix it up like a good fellow. It will mean a whole lot for them, and you'll feel a good deal better for acting on the square."

"You're right, my boy, and I've been in the wrong, I see that," confessed the young man, after a moment's reflection. "I don't want any trouble, either. Got a party with me and this thing is disagreeable. What would be fair for those children, now?"

"It isn't any great amount," replied Pep, truthfully—"only, if I were you I'd give them about twenty dollars."

"Twenty dollars?"

"Yes, by your looks I should say that wasn't any great amount for you to pay."

"Well, hardly," answered the young man, with something of a grin. "Why, a tire costs me twice that!"

"So it does, and I guess you wreck a good many tires—riding around in such a wild fashion."

"I do."

"Then you will give the youngsters the money?"

"Will you take it to them?" inquired the young man, drawing out his pocketbook.

"I'll be glad to," replied Pep, promptly. "And say, as you leave here stop at the gate and tell them who you are, and notice how happy this big help will make them."

Benny and Ruth acted indeed as though the great fortune they fondly believed would be theirs some day was beginning to drift their way, when Pep gave them the twenty dollars.

"Why, it's twenty dollars!" exclaimed the girl, in huge delight.

"Just that," returned the motion picture young man.

"It's a lot of money," murmured Benny, and his eyes glistened as he looked at the crisp bank bills.

"Well, it belongs to you," returned Pep. "You lost that much when the flower stand was wrecked."

"So we did," returned the boy. "But, somehow, I never expected to get this," he added.

"Well, take good care of it," went on Pep. "You may need it some day."

A little later the young man came up and introduced himself. When he saw how happy Ruth and Benny were he was happy himself.

"I'm mighty glad I got this off my conscience," he told Pep. "That money means a good deal more to them than it does to me."

And then he bought a number of flowers at the stand and gave the young folks a five dollar bill and refused all change.

"I guess he's all right after all," cried Benny, when the young man had gone.

"Oh, he was lovely!" answered his sister.

"I know what we can do to-night," went on the boy. "We'll celebrate by seeing the show at the Airdrome this evening."

"All right," said Ruth; and that night they visited the motion picture playhouse, never dreaming of the great surprise in store for them.

## CHAPTER XXIII

### THE EXPLOSION

PEP SMITH stuck his head into the sheet iron booth just before Frank was ready to begin the first reel. A slight drizzle had set in after a fair day, but it promised no heavy showers and might let up at any moment. It was necessary, however, to shelter the enclosure. It made no difference, therefore, what the Columbia searchlight did. Just the same, Pep kept watch on the rival photo playhouse.

"No Slavin tricks to-night, I guess, Frank," he reported. "Either they've busted up or have grown tired of bothering us."

"I thought they flashed over us about ten minutes ago," remarked Frank.

"They did, and that was queer. The light came on in a straggly sort of a way and popped off like a burned-out fuse. Nothing since. Then, just now, Mr. Artingstall came in to see the show. He says they were having a scene down

at the Columbia, Slavin claiming that some one was tampering with the searchlight and putting it out of commission."

"It will be a wonder if he doesn't lay it to us," said Frank.

The drizzle brought in a remarkably good crowd. It cleared up later and the canvas roof was rolled up, but no further demonstration was made by the searchlight. The crowd thinned out as the last set of reels was ready. It was at that moment that Pep greeted two visitors with genial smiles.

"Thought we'd close up early," reported little Benny, hobbling in on his crutches.

"I've brought a bouquet for your table," said Ruth, handing Pep some roses done up in tissue paper, "and I want to sit near Mr. Jolly so I can watch him play the piano."

The little mite was very fond of music. Pep led Benny and his sister to two vacant seats directly behind Jolly, who welcomed them in a way that made them feel like honored guests. Their smiling faces told of their keen enjoyment of music and pictures.

Just before the last set of films came on, Mr. Strapp entered the playhouse. Pep told him of the presence of his two favorites and the West-erner went forward and sat with them. He con-

versed pleasantly with them until the starting signal buzzed from the operating booth. Then they became engrossed in watching "A Quiet Village." This was a humorous set of incidents, portraying scenes in a typical country town. Among other features in the story there was an election scene. In this a candidate was introduced to a large assemblage. As he appeared in the film his face and figure showed very prominently.

"Oh, Benny!" burst out Ruth in a startled voice. "Look—look!"

"Why!" cried the little cripple, so loudly that his tones were heard distinctly all about him, "it's Uncle Jasper!"

"What's that!" asked Mr. Strapp, staring at the children.

The scene faded away, but Benny and Ruth sat looking excitedly at one another. They were so wrought up that they did not heed Mr. Strapp's questioning.

"Did you see it?" whispered Ruth, her voice trembling.

"Of course I did," replied her brother, with bulging eyes. "Why, it was just the same as he looked the last time we saw him."

"Yes, when he ran away from us," nodded Ruth. "Say, Benny, how does he come to be in

a movies picture? He's a candidate, too, or something like that. Oh, dear! I wish they would show that picture over again."

"Well! well!" said quick-witted Mr. Strapp to himself, "there's something here to think about. Keep those Burns children here till after the show, Pep," he directed, coming to the front of the house. "I want to see Durham, too, as soon as he is through with this film."

Jolly and Pep were conversing with Benny and his sister after the audience had passed out. As they came towards them Mr. Strapp was telling Frank of the strange declaration of the two children.

"Oh, Mr. Durham," cried Benny, as Frank came up to them—"the funniest thing!"

"Yes," broke in little Ruth—"that last picture you showed: Uncle Jasper was in it."

"You mean your half-uncle, Jasper Patterson, whom you told us about?" asked Frank.

"Oh, sure it was," declared Benny positively—"his face was just as plain as day. It was gone before we could look at him real long, but oh! it was he, sure enough."

"I am going to show that scene over again, children," said Frank, "and I want you to notice the man very closely, will you? Be sure that you make no mistake. Come with me, Randy.



I want to fix the film and have you run it. Then I will come back and see it from the front."

Randy had taken more than one lesson from his chum in the operating booth. Frank got the projector in shape for the special run he wished, giving Randy explicit instructions. Then Frank went forward and sat with the little folks.

"Oh, my! He looks as if he was just coming out of the picture," exclaimed Benny as the "candidate" scene flashed across the screen.

"And look, Benny," cried little Ruth, "that scar on his cheek—don't you remember it?"

"I should say I did," replied her brother, "Mr. Durham, that man is my Uncle Jasper!"

"The man who ran away with your fortune. It's a lucky thing you came here to-night, Benny."

"Why, what do you mean, Mr. Durham?" inquired the cripple.

"I am going to find Jasper Patterson," answered Frank, "and that picture is going to help me do it."

The little ones were in a flutter of excitement as Pep went with them as far as a restaurant, where the proprietress, a kind-hearted woman, had agreed to give the young folks a temporary home.

When Pep returned to the Airdrome he found

Frank looking over the film that had led to so strange a discovery. The leader of the motion picture chums looked very thoughtful and absorbed for over half an hour.

"Do you think you could run the projector for a night or two if I should be away, Randy?" he finally asked.

"I feel pretty sure I could, Frank," replied Randy. "You know I did it for nearly a week at the Empire."

"Well," said Frank, "I am going to the city the first thing in the morning. Of course you know what I am after—to try and find where, when and by whom that film was taken. The rest will be easy."

"And I'll take charge of the ticket booth," volunteered Mr. Strapp. "Make me really useful, Durham. Wherever you can, fit me in."

They had just concluded a brief luncheon at the living quarters at the rear of the Airdrome when there came a startling commotion.

A blast like the explosion of a giant cannon rang through the enclosure. Even the part they were in shook and the windows rattled.

They could hear a tearing, ripping sound like the parting of wood and iron and glass, and then there rang out one thrilling scream, at the front of the Airdrome.

## CHAPTER XXIV

### FRANK DURHAM'S QUEST

"SOMETHING's happened!" shouted Pep, making a dive for the main enclosure, from which they were separated by only a narrow passageway.

The others followed him. Frank turned and snapped an electric switch, once past the stage. Its rays showed the exit door off its hinges and a great litter of glass choking up the threshold.

"Say, the canopy's busted to pieces!" shouted Pep, but this was an exaggeration. There were blank spaces in the pagoda where panes of varicolored glass had been blown out of place. One supporting post was splintered to pieces and its remnants scattered all about. There was a big hole in the cement pavement, but the main front of the enclosure was intact.

"Frank!" quavered Randy, catching the arm of his chum, trembling all over and pointing towards the road—"there's someone."

Frank thrilled as he stared and then advanced to an object lying prone in the roadway. The pavement was littered with minute pieces of tin, and at one spot the metal handle of some kind of a can was to be observed. By this time Frank was pretty well convinced that some powerful explosive had been purposely set off in front of the Airdrome in order to destroy it.

"Why this is terrible!" exclaimed Ben Jolly. "It's a man—or a boy," added the piano player in an awed whisper, as they advanced to where the silent figure lay.

Near the prostrate form was a section of the big supporting post. It looked to Frank as if the person before him had set off the explosive. Then, in running away to escape, a section of the shattered post had felled him.

Frank knelt beside the motionless figure. He noticed one hand that was extended. It was blackened and burned and clutched the end of a burned out powder fuse.

"Whoever he is, he seems badly hurt," reported Frank, and his friends clustered about him, their attention centered on the insensible victim of the explosion. They watched breathlessly as he turned over the body.

"Oh, Frank!" almost screamed Pep. "It's Dave Sawyer!"

A dead silence fell on the group. To each one was suggested the dark suspicion that their former friend was an instrument of the base-hearted Slavin, bribed or forced to act in a plot against a business rival. Jolly was the first to speak.

"He looks desperately hurt," he said in a solemn tone.

The face of the insensible boy was blackened with powder and one side of his head was bruised and bleeding. A wave of pity passed over the generous heart of the leader of the motion picture chums as he lifted the helpless boy.

"Telephone to the office of the grounds, quick, Randy," he directed. "Tell them to send an automobile right away."

People who had heard the explosion came running to the Airdrome. Frank heard one man say:

"The young fellow who works up at the Columbia? That's enough. Slavin has put him up to this and he's got what's coming to him."

"Frank, you don't really think that Sawyer set off that explosion?" whispered the shocked Randy.

"I think Mr. Slavin is responsible for it," replied Frank, evasively. "Help Mr. Jolly,

please," he added, as one of the sightseeing motor cars of the Grove drew up. "Now to the hospital in the town quick as you can," he ordered the chauffeur.

Frank and Jolly placed their insensible charge upon one of the seats of the machine. Neither spoke during the speedy run to a private hospital in the village, but both looked grave. Neither could keep back the thoughts that would suggest themselves. On the surface it looked bad for Dave Sawyer, Frank had to admit. Still, every time he looked at the face of the lad he had befriended and so liked, he could not believe the boy had meant to do them harm.

The hospital people soon had Dave in charge, the supervising physician made an examination and the patient was given over to the care of skilled nurses.

"Is it serious, Doctor?" asked Frank, anxiously.

"If you mean critical," responded the physician, "I think not. The physical injury is slight and his burns trivial, but the patient has sustained a very severe shock and he may not recover quickly."

"Please telephone us of any change," requested Frank.

"Yes, if he gets worse, especially," added Ben

Jolly. "There's a pretty good reason why we should ask him some questions, if he is going to die."

"I scarcely apprehend that," said the doctor. "He is young and vigorous and will rally in time. I shall keep you fully advised."

It was nearly two hours before those at the Airdrome could quiet themselves sufficiently to even think of such a thing as sleep. Mr. Artingstall had come to investigate the explosion. He shared the suspicions of the majority of exhibitors on the grounds—that the outrage had emanated from Slavin. He had even gone to the Columbia in an effort to see and question its proprietor. He had found the place in darkness and had not been able to locate Slavin.

"We had better make no move until we learn what Dave Sawyer has to tell," advised Frank. "The poor fellow may have been passing the Airdrome—"

"What! with a piece of fuse in his hand?" asked the manager.

"Do not form any harsh opinion, Mr. Artingstall," urged Frank, "until we learn what this unfortunate boy has to tell."

Dave Sawyer did not tell any story the following day, however. Frank was bright and early

at the hospital, but the report he received was not encouraging.

"The patient has a high fever and is delirious most of the time," said the doctor. "It may be several days before it will be safe to allow any visitors."

Frank, uneasy and anxious as he was, had to be content with this. He returned to the Air-drome to summon his business associates to him.

"I feel that I should act on the Burns matter at once," Frank advised them. "If Benny and his sister are right as to identifying the man in that film we showed last night as Jasper Patterson, their half-uncle, a very little investigation will locate him."

"You speak pretty confidently, Durham," remarked Mr. Strapp.

"That's because I know the movies' ways," explained Frank. "I know what company owns the film. That will be my starting point. If the company who made the film is also in New York City, their records will show what special movies crew acted in the film. Then to locate the man in charge of them and I shall have my clew direct. The point to reach is where this Jasper Patterson is now located. Once we find that out, we've got our man."

Frank arranged that Randy should take charge



of the operating booth if he did not return that evening. Ben Jolly agreed to keep in touch with the hospital and see that everything was done for Dave Sawyer that would help his recovery.

An hour later Frank Durham reached New York City and started on his search for the man who had defrauded Benny Burns and his sister out of their fortune.

## CHAPTER XXV

### CONCLUSION

FRANK went at once to the exchange from which the film in which he was interested had been purchased. The Airdrome was a valued client of the supply house, and the young leader of the motion picture chums received instant attention.

"These are the people who made the reel you are interested in, Mr. Durham," said the manager, handing Frank a card bearing a city address. "I have written my name on the back of the card, which will serve as a special introduction."

It was to the Mo-Pic Company that Frank was directed, and within the hour he was explaining his mission to the manager.

"Some queer things happen in our line," remarked the man. "You are not the first person who has come to follow up a clew gained from a motion picture. 'A Quiet Village' is a new

film. Let me see," and the speaker consulted a record book. "That was one of a New England circuit. 'A—21.' Oh, yes—John Parks's crew. Let me see further"—and he scanned another written volume—"that crowd is out West now doing some desert scenes."

"This Mr. Parks would be the man to see about any specific details?" inquired Frank.

"That's it, and, by the way, Parks is in New York City at the present time. Had a bad tumble in a cliff scene last circuit he was on and has been laid up ever since. Had to send a substitute on the desert trip. Wait a minute, I'll find out where he lives."

The manager went away and returned with a slip of paper.

"You'll find Parks at that address," he said. "He's one of our best men—good memory and all that—and what he can't remember he can hunt up for you, I have no doubt."

Frank found Parks to be an odd character. He had been an acrobat once. He was just recovering from a badly sprained limb, and acted rather proudly over some facial scars which were cherished mementoes of dives, slips and falls acting in a variety of thrilling scenarios. Frank told the story of what he was after.

"Oh, 'A Quiet Village,'" spoke Parks

promptly. "I recall it distinctly. What did you want to know, Mr. Durham?"

"I wanted to find out the name of the town where the film was taken."

"Why, it was an obscure country town in Massachusetts. Croydon was the place."

"And the man you showed addressing the crowd where there is a fight between the actors in your scenario?"

"I remember him perfectly, as if he was before me: We took advantage of a real mass meeting to work into our film. The central figure was running for selectman and was one of the principal citizens; I remember he was said to be quite wealthy."

"Of course you don't remember the name," said Frank.

"Oh, but I do," asserted the lively Parks. "It was advertised all over town, so I remember it distinctly. It was William Thorp."

"Not Jasper Patterson!" spoke Frank disappointedly.

"Why, no," answered Parks, with a puzzled look at his visitor.

Frank protracted the conversation until he had secured every important detail from Parks. Even to the scar on the face of the candidate of the film, Parks remembered little particulars. Frank

was satisfied that this William Thorp was no other than Jasper Patterson masquerading under an assumed name.

When he left the house Frank went to the office of Mr. Strapp's lawyer. The Westerner had directed him to do this and to give all the details of his discoveries to the attorney.

"That's about as far as we can go until the lawyer looks up this Thorp," reflected Frank, as he started to call at the Empire photo play-house before he returned to Riverside Grove.

As he was passing the corner drug store where the little Burns waifs formerly had their flower stand, Frank decided to go in and get a glass of soda and shake hands with his old friend, Mr. Ross.

The druggist came from behind the prescription case to give Frank a friendly welcome. Then he drew him aside.

"Take a look at that man just leaving," he said in a low tone. "Do you know him, Mr. Durham?"

Frank glanced at the individual indicated. He had never seen the man before to his present knowledge, and said so.

"The reason I ask," explained the druggist, as the man walked out of the store, "is that he

has been in here twice this week inquiring about the Burns children."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Frank, and then a thought came to his mind. Could this be the mysterious stranger Pep had mentioned who had offered to send the waifs to California? Recalling the incident, Frank remembered the description given of the man.

"It must be the same," he mused. He was sorry he had not got immediately on the trail of the fellow, who by this time had mingled with the crowd outside.

"His name is Bracey, it seems," said the druggist. "The way I know it is that after pumping me about the Burns children just now, he ordered some toilet articles sent to that name and his address."

"Mr. Ross," spoke up Frank quickly, "allow me to deliver the order, will you?"

"Why, certainly, if you wish to," replied the druggist, in surprise. "Something wrong with the man, Mr. Durham?"

"I mistrust his interest in those children—yes."

Half an hour later Frank tapped at the door of a suite of rooms in an apartment building on a fashionable avenue. He wished to have another look at the man who had impressed him so

strongly. In this he was disappointed, for a heavy-set, full-whiskered man answered his summons.

"A parcel for Mr. Bracey," said Frank, and then he fixed his eyes keenly upon the person before him. In a flash the candidate in "A Quiet Village" was recalled. "Aren't you Mr. Thorp?" he asked abruptly.

"Why—er—yes, how do you come to know me?" blurted out the man, caught off his guard.

"And weren't you once Jasper Patterson?" proceeded Frank, boldly.

"Boy, what are you up to?" returned the man, huskily, and he caught Frank's arm and pulled him into the room.

Evidently the man was much agitated.

"I want to have a talk with you, Mr. Patterson," said Frank.

"Who—er—who told you my name was Patterson?" demanded the man, rather harshly.

"I knew you—by your picture."

"My picture?"

"Yes,—the one you had taken in a motion picture drama some time ago."

"Ha! who told you—" The man stopped short. "I—er—it is all a mistake. I—er—I don't know the man you are speaking of."

"Excuse me for doubting you, sir. I know

you, even down to that scar on your face. And I know something else—that beard you are wearing is false. You might as well take it off.”

“Say, you know too much,” growled the man, biting his lip. “Who sent you here, anyway?”

“Nobody in particular, Mr. Patterson.”

“My name is Thorp—William Thorp.”

“Maybe it is, now. But it used to be Jasper Patterson. You were a half-uncle to two little children, Ruth and Benny Burns.”

At the mention of those names the man fell back a step or two. He heaved a deep sigh.

“What’s all the talking about?” asked another voice, and Frank saw another man, standing in the doorway of the next room.

“This young man just brought a parcel for you, Bracey,” said the man with the false beard. “It’s from the drug store.”

“Oh, all right, it’s paid for, so he can leave it,” answered the other.

“Do you work for the druggist?” went on the other man, curiously.

“No,” answered Frank. “I just came here with that parcel so I could see you. I had a talk with Mr. Ross first. Now, Mr. Patterson, supposing we get down to business.”

“Hello, does he know you, Patterson?” cried Bracey, in surprise.

“Shut up!” yelled the other. “Hang the



luck, you have spoiled it all," and the half-uncle of the Burns's children looked anything but happy.

"It's all right," went on Frank. "I knew you, in spite of that false beard. You are Jasper Patterson, *alias* William Thorp."

"Well, what of it, if I am?" growled the man, and now he sank into a chair, pulling off his disguise as he did so.

"I am here for a purpose," continued the young motion picture manager. "I know Ruth and Benny Burns well and I know you are holding a fortune that rightfully belongs to them."

"It belongs to Patterson," interposed Bracey, in ugly tones.

"My business is with Mr. Patterson, not with you," replied Frank, sharply. "You keep out of this, or you'll get into trouble. I know something of your game, too."

"You do!"

"Yes. You wanted to send the children to California—to get them out of the way."

"Say, you know too much," grumbled Bracey, and then he, too, sank into a chair.

"Do you dare to deny it?"

"I'm not saying anything about it."

"You had better let me do the talking," said Jasper Patterson, with a sudden show of nervousness.

"All right, fire away," returned Bracey. Evidently he was completely under the thumb of the other.

"This is—er—entirely unexpected," stammered Jasper Patterson, turning again to Frank. "Pray sit down and let us talk matters over."

"All right," replied Frank, and sat down on a chair near the door. He did not know but what the two men might attack him and he wanted to be in a position to make good his escape. But the man who had wronged the Burns children was not of the fighting kind. At heart he was a great coward. He had taken the fortune simply because the children were too young to help themselves, and much of his dirty work had been done for him by Bracey.

"Would you mind telling me how—er—you managed to follow me up?" asked Jasper Patterson.

"Not in the least, Mr. Patterson. First of all, let me say, I am in the motion picture business."

"You make films?"

"No, I am part proprietor of several photo playhouses. Well, one of the films we showed was called 'A Quiet Village.' Perhaps you remember it."

"I do," came with almost a groan.

"It showed you well."

"I was a fool to allow myself to be photographed."

"Well, at one of our places of business little Benny Burns and his sister Ruth have a flower stand, given to them by one of my side partners, a rich gentleman from Butte, Montana. We know the children well and have been much interested in their story of their lost fortune."

"Go on," grumbled Jasper Patterson.

"When we showed the picture 'A Quiet Village' the Burns children saw it. At once one of them cried out that your picture was that of their half-uncle, the one who had run off with their money. We became interested, of course, and ran the picture over for them, privately. They recognized you at once, and pointed out that scar," and Frank motioned to the mark in question.

"And then?" went on Jasper Patterson, as the youth paused.

"The rest was easy, for one in my line of business. I knew the company that put out the reel and from the manager found out where the film was taken, in Croydon, Massachusetts, your present home."

"Oh, so you—er—know where I now live!" groaned the swindler.

"I do, and I know you move in good society under the name of William Thorp."

"Oh, do not expose me! For the sake of my family, I beg of you!" cried the other. "I will make amends——"

"But how did you get here?" asked Bracey, curiously.

"That was partly accidental. I went to Mr. Ross as a friend and he mentioned you and said you had been in twice to learn something about the Burns children. He had that parcel to deliver and I asked him to let me bring it. I wanted to learn from you what you knew about Jasper Patterson, *alias* William Thorp, and what you had to do with this case."

"I—I ain't done anything wrong!" cried Bracey. He was practically as much of a coward as the man who had hired him.

"That remains to be seen," returned Frank, coldly. "I think it is a great wrong to keep those children out of the money that is rightfully coming to them."

"I didn't keep 'em out of the money."

"The children are not yet of age," put in Jasper Patterson, with sudden craftiness. "They can't expect to get their money until that time."

"Such a plea from you won't do, Mr. Patterson," answered Frank, sternly. "What have you done for the children in the last few years? They might have starved so far as you were concerned."

"I kept an eye on them—through Bracey," faltered the swindler.

"You are living off of their money."

"No! no! That is not so! I am living off of my own money," cried Jasper Patterson.

"We'll see about that. I am going to take this matter to a first-class lawyer. Perhaps when you find yourself in jail——"

"No! no! Not that, Mr.—er—I don't know your name."

"Frank Durham."

"It won't be necessary for you to—er—resort to the law, Mr. Durham. What I said is strictly true—I am not using the Burns's money, not now. I—er—I did use some of it, at first. I used it to make money. One fortune made me another. I am now worth as much in my own name as the Burns's fortune amounts to."

"Then you have the money that is coming to Ruth and Benny?" cried Frank, eagerly.

"Yes, every cent of it."

"And you will give it to the children?"

"Yes—when they are of age."

"Excuse me, Mr. Patterson, but I——"

"Call me Mr. Thorp. That is my legally adopted name. I dropped Patterson long ago."

"All right then, Mr. Thorp. But what I was going to say is this: Considering how you have

acted in the past, you cannot expect the Burns children, or any of their friends, to trust you with the handling of that fortune any longer. You'll have to turn it over to somebody else to handle—somebody selected by the court, if necessary."

"Well—I—er—I will consider that," answered the man, slowly.

"There is no considering about it. It's what you've got to do," answered Frank, quickly.

"Do you threaten me?"

"Yes, if you want it straight."

"I am an influential man in my town, Mr. Durham."

"Perhaps you are, at present. But you won't be when this story gets around."

Jasper Patterson shifted uneasily and looked at the other man.

"Looks to me as if the game was up," said Bracey. He grinned at Frank. "You're a pretty smart one."

"I try to be," said the youth.

"It was foolish of me to allow myself to get in that motion picture," said Jasper Patterson. "But that is done now, and it is useless to talk about it. You say you know the Burns children well?"

"I certainly do," answered Frank. "We look on them as kind of mascots for our outdoor ex-

hibition. They have a beautiful pagoda where they sell flowers." Frank looked keenly at the rich man. "See here, Mr. Patter—I mean Mr. Thorp. Why not clean this whole matter up in a nice, gentlemanly way?" he continued, earnestly. "Surely you don't want to swindle a couple of innocent children, your relatives at that?"

"I—I said they should have the money—when they became of age."

"But we want to make sure they will get it. Now, be reasonable about it."

"Well, if I should agree to turn over the fortune to another person—one selected by the court——"

"With proper interest," interposed the businesslike youth.

"Yes, with proper interest. If I did that, would you—er—would the children and the other interested parties consent to do it in—er—in private—no needless exposure in my home town, and all that?"

"That might be arranged. I have no desire to hurt anybody. I only want to see Benny and Ruth get what is justly coming to them. They have suffered considerable because of your neglect, but maybe they will let that pass, if they get every dollar of the fortune, with interest."

"Then they shall have it—every cent of it!" cried Jasper Patterson. "For a long time I have

thought that I ought to make amends. But I did not know just how to go about it. But now I will do the right thing."

"What about me?" demanded Bracey.

"I will pay you what I promised you, and then we'll have to part company," answered the half-uncle of the Burns children.

"All right; do that and I shall be satisfied," said the other.

"You will have to come at once with me to a lawyer," said Frank, who was not willing to leave Jasper Patterson out of his sight.

"What, now?"

"Yes."

"But I have other affairs that I must look after."

"This must come first, sir."

"You insist?" groaned the swindler.

"I do, most assuredly.

"Very well then, I'll go," said Jasper Patterson.

And a few minutes later he and Frank were on the way.

"Oh, Mr. Durham! I'm glad to see you."

It was Dave Sawyer, weak and tremulous, who spoke the words from his hospital cot.

It was the day following Frank's visit to the city, and the doctor had telephoned to Frank



that the patient had recovered consciousness and was constantly calling for him. And now the feverish hand of Dave clasped that of the young leader of the motion picture chums, and his eyes looked glad.

"You have had quite a hard time of it, Sawyer," said Frank, gently.

"Mr. Durham," returned Dave, wistfully, "you don't believe I blew up the Airdrome, do you? Why, I tried to save it. Didn't you ever guess that I left you and went with that villain, Slavin, just because I knew what kind of a man he was? I was sure he would try to annoy you, and I was on hand to keep him from doing it. I wrecked that searchlight. I followed him when he took that can of explosive to destroy the Airdrome. I managed to save the building, but the can exploded in my hand, and—I'm here."

"You brave fellow!" exclaimed Frank. "My thoughts have been with you all the time you have lain suffering here."

"Search in my coat, Mr. Durham, will you?" asked Dave. "You will find a sealed envelope in the inside pocket. I stole it—yes, I stole it from Slavin. That, too, is what I was after in going back to him. It's a confession of a theft he got my poor father to sign, and he held it over me as a threat to force me to work for

little or nothing for him. Now my father, who is leading a new and better life, will not be troubled."

"Slavin has left the Columbia with a load of debts, and disappeared," said Frank.

"Probably because he missed the letter, heard I was here and feared being exposed," observed Dave. "Is everything clear now, Mr. Durham?"

"So clear," cried Frank, "that you want to hurry up and get well, and we'll give you such a reception at the Airdrome that you will know what true and loyal friends we all are to you."

That event came about a week later. It was after a day and evening of such crowded houses as the Airdrome had never known before—the Airdrome, now best paying and most attractive feature of Riverside Grove.

Pep had charge of the "grand banquet" in the living quarters of the motion picture chums. Mr. Strapp presided, and Benny and his sister Ruth were there. Dave Sawyer, a guest of honor, sat with tears of joy in his earnest eyes, as he realized that he had found a haven of peace and contentment at last.

"I have some great news to report," announced Mr. Strapp, with a glance at the two little flower sellers.

"Meaning us, Mr. Strapp?" piped Benny.

"Just that," replied the smiling Westerner. "That wicked half-uncle of yours, Jasper Patterson, has been obliged to disgorge the money he stole from you, and it is quite a little fortune. You caught the rascal just in time, Durham."

"How was that?" inquired Frank.

"I am satisfied that he and that accomplice of his, Bracey, had a plan in view to kidnap the children. Jasper Patterson will not suffer much, for with that fortune he built up a larger one, so, even after giving up what belongs to Benny and Ruth, he can continue to be the nabob of that town where he lives."

It was a great night for the motion picture chums and their friends. Generous-hearted Mr. Strapp beamed upon the gay party about him like some indulgent father.

"I declare!" he remarked, "I never was so happy in my life. It was a lucky day when I went into partnership with the motion picture chums."

"Oh, we have only fairly begun our business career," declared Frank buoyantly. "I have several plans for extending our business and winning new fame and fortune in the movies field."

One of these plans even now Frank had in

clear view, and the especial one he was then getting ready for will be told in a future volume, entitled: "The Motion Picture Chums' New Idea; Or, The First Educational Photo Playhouse."

And here, for the time being, we will say good-bye to the motion picture chums, wishing them well.

THE END

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